

Fantasy



Marion Zimmer Bradley's

Magazine
Summer 2000
Issue #8

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by Darrell Schweitzer

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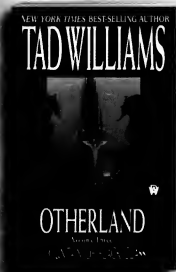
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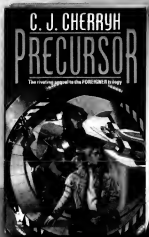
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Fantasy

Magazine

Creation: Work or Play?



n the trendy parlance of the web, people like me have a new designation: we're "greyware". And there are no longer "authors" or "illustrators", no "writers" or "artists": these people are now "content providers". But one of the oldest scams continues, one which makes me embarrassed to wear the title Publisher. Whether the medium be electronic, paper, or vellum, the scam is the same: don't pay the people who generate ideas. They just do it for fun! (Or not — someone once asked Stephen King why he wrote such scary books and he replied, "What makes you think I have any choice?")

Suzette Haden Elgin recently commented in email that writers are often seen as "typists with a bad attitude" and viewed as the barrier between publishers and the real money, e.g., licensing subsidiary rights. (I suspect that the people who get paid best are the creative **marketing** types.) Margaret Organ-Kean has been battling with the owners of several websites on behalf of ASFA, the artists' organization, because the sites have posted artwork obtained by wholesale scanning of art books without any permission from either the publishers or the artists in question. I used to sell hand-made clothing at Ren Faire, and I loved making it. But I also had to eat and pay bills, needed to live and work somewhere. Musicians are concerned that Napster will end their royalties from recording sales. And a recent *New York Times Magazine* column by Max Frankel ("The Nirvana News", July 9, 2000) details the grim future of print newspapers when their chief revenue sources — classified and display advertising — move away. The web is a great source of quick headlines, but Frankel points out that it has really only replaced a newspaper's trucks. [The Web] "has not produced very good reporter robots or electronic editors... News that analyzes... is an expensive, handmade commodity." All these are struggles with the same difficulty: what we love to do may not yield enough for our living expenses (let alone retirement funds or charitable donations to causes we care about).

Book publishers team unknown writers with established cover artists to encourage sales. That fact alone shows the value of artists. In a typical issue of this magazine, the total cost for art rights is comparable to, or more than, the total amount we have paid for story rights. I've published, and authorized payment for, artwork in this magazine because I feel it illuminates the stories, much as news analysis illuminates events.

This greyware declares: the difficulty of work should not correlate to its worth, and creative people should be paid appropriately for work done both joyfully and well.

Rachel Holman

Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy

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Summer 2000
Issue 48

C o n t e n t s



Cover Story

The Invisible Knight's Squire

by Darrell Schweitzer; art by Michael Kucharski
The armored man feared light. Was he a devil?

4



Tante Hélène

by Patricia Russo; art by Margaret Organ-Kean
A Baroque farce of love and magic.

13

The Selkie's Tale

by Laura J. Underwood; art by Allison Fiona Hershey
Rhoyd suspects that Conor's tale is true

20

The Secret

by Stacie Kirk; art by Alan Gutierrez
Should an artist be able to paint pictures that are truly lifelike?

24

The Fey

by Renee Bennett; art by Heather Hudson
She saw what nobody else did, in a forest nobody knew

28

Mistaken Identity

by Charles Richard Laing; art by Omar Rayyan
Never make assumptions—it may cost your life!

32

Ravenous

by Ladonna King; art by Julia Lacquement
Sheylan is offered a partnership.

38





Interior illustration for "Ravenous" by Julia Lacquement

Nightchild 50

by Marian Allen; art by Lori Deitrick
Now Doris understood why her mother had always been so protective...

Princess Angelina and the Dragon 56

by Renee Carter Hall; art by George Barr
A new twist on an old tale

Regular Features

Letters 34

Ann Sharp Talks to Writers: Foreshadowing 36

by Ann Sharp

Interview with Pamela Dean 44

by Lawrence Schimel

The Last Word 62

by Rachel E. Holmen

The Cauldron: Vote for Your Favorites 64

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by
Darrell
Schweitzer

When he came in the night, crashing through the door of my humble abode amid howling wind and freezing rain, I thought he was a thief after my cloak or my shoes. The loss of either would have meant death: pain, numbness, black rot. But I didn't have time to explain all this —

"Silence, boy!" he thundered at me, and his voice seemed to shake the earth; and I started to choke on my own words even as he seized me and shook me and I never got to explaining that I wasn't a boy because, look, look, I had a scraggly something that could pass for a beard —

He yanked on it, as if he knew my thought, and said, "Ha! It takes more than chin-hairs to make a man. Therefore I command you. Silence!"

But there was no silence as he shook the splinters of the door off himself and advanced, like a victorious army into a doomed castle, and my hovel echoed with words I couldn't understand.

I fought. My fists bounced uselessly off his armor like stones rattling down a mountainside.

My fingers found his visor. Then iron fingers crushed my wrists.

"Don't you ever —" he said without need to finish.

He forced me to sit on a stack of my priceless books. I fell over, in a heap. He crouched beside me, armor creaking and groaning. He rummaged among the books and tossed a heavy volume aside as if it were trash.

"What are you?" he said.

"What are you?"

"I asked first," he said. "Answer." His sword slid from his scabbard, rasping.

"For God's sake, let me light a candle first," I said.

"For God's sake, I command you, do not."

I was very afraid then, fearing for my worthless life and soul. What kind of devil was this, who would strike me dead if I beheld him?

I heard him sigh and settle down, as a man might, and for an instant dared to hope that he was just a madman, and we could all be madmen together, he and I and whoever might listen to our story, and we might weep and laugh, trilling snatches of wordless songs, mad beyond all hope and pain.

But he merely said, "What are you?" I was angry then. I didn't care if he cut me in half.

"Just a poor student, studying to be a



misanthrope. These are my texts. The one you have so barbarously handled is called **ON HATING MANKIND** by Isaac of Edessa. I have here also **THE HIGH AND HOLY ROMANCE OF SIR FLIBBERDEYGIBBET** —

He grabbed me by the collar, from behind. Maybe he was a phantom after all. He wasn't where I expected him to be, and I hadn't heard him move. I felt his blade slide gently across the side of my neck.

"That tells me nothing —" His breath was hot, but not sulfurous. He was, then, more likely a madman than not. Of course, with the knights of the Round Table traipsing all over England in search of the damned Grail these days, madmen in armor were as common as starlings.

"A hermit, then, let us say."

"A holy hermit, who will cleanse the wounds and heal the soul of an errant and erring knight?"

I gulped, and said slowly, "I'm afraid God hasn't had much to do with me of late."

"Boy! You blaspheme! But I forgive you. For in blasphemy you are human, capable of sinning and therefore of redemption."

I didn't try to follow the theological

acrobatics of that argument, but I was relieved when he put his sword away.

Rain and sleet rattled through the remains of my door. Water poured down. I scrambled to put all my books into their leather bags. As I did, I heard my visitor stirring, creaking in his armor. Once he was whispering something. Possibly he was praying, as madmen often do with such intensity.

He grabbed me again and hauled me to him as if I were a rag doll, and said, "God sent me to you. You appeared to me in my vision, and I was led to this place. But it is a condition of my vision, or curse, or quest, or whatever you want to call it that I must remain as one invisible until my soul is healed of its grievous wounds. Now you may think this amusing, or the intriguing premise for a really good romance of chivalry full of poetic flourishes, but I assure you, that it is a hard, miserable affair, a purgatory on Earth. Theophanes, you must swear to serve me as my squire. I am sent to you by God."

I was afraid again, for I had not told him my name.

And all the while he was with me, he never told me his.

I could only say, "What does God want with me?"

"You'll have to ask him."

That was how it all began. I swore to serve him and broke my word as soon as I could. That night we shared a meager repast, bread as hard as wood and cheese not much better, and a little wine, and he bade me clean his armor for him; so he took off that armor and withdrew a little ways off, while my hands did their work and my mind turned and my anger grew.

He had intruded on my private suffering. He would not allow me to be miserable in my own way. I hated him for that.

I cleansed his sword, too, and thought of killing him with it.

Then, in the darkness, he showed me how to strap his armor back onto his body, piece by piece. I felt that he wore a hairshirt. I said nothing about it. In that hairshirt, in that armor, he slept.

At dawn, I looked at him, all in a heap against the wall, beneath my ruined roof, and I thought me, *This is not a man, much less a devil, but a pile of junk*. And I violated, first, the secondary part of my oath to him, that I would never look on his face. I crept over to him and raised his visor, then drew back, not entirely amazed when I saw

that there was no one there.

It was a pile of junk.

I thought to gather up his armor, take it into the nearest village, and try to sell it, but I was afraid to do that. Instead, more sensibly, I gathered up my books and my blanket and stole out into the morning drizzle.

I robbed my knight only of a jeweled poniard and of a purse of coins.

I walked for hours. I must have lost my way. I didn't want to go back to any village anyway, for, I told myself, a misanthrope is one who despises mankind, and I was a misanthrope, wasn't I? Not a holy hermit, not someone blessed or cursed with visions.

It is said that fools and sinners sometimes turn into saints, but I wasn't about to let that happen. I had that much control over my life still.

If I could find one deserted charcoal-burner's shed, I could always find another. If I found one still inhabited by a charcoal-burner, I could always read poetry at him and drive him away, for base mankind cannot bear the sound of true beauty.

Thus my adventures began in the cold and the rain.

First wolves gathered around me, their eyes burning, breath like smoke; and the wolves spoke among themselves, saying, "*Here is the false squire, through whom we can work his master's destruction.*"

I tried to tell them that I wasn't a squire at all.

The wolves followed me, like hounds after a huntsman, and we came to a clearing where white doves rested upon a stone. The wolves looked to me, as if for a command, but I said nothing to them, and the wolves leaped forward as one, seizing the doves in their teeth, and their snouts were covered with blood.

And I saw that the stone was carved with the image of a knight, lying as if in a tomb. Then, though it seemed but an hour or two since dawn, again the sky was fully dark, and sleet rattled through the trees. Feasting wolves crouched all around. The tomb opened, stone grind-



ing. I couldn't see, but there was a combat in the darkness, as if many knights contended together. Metal clanged, and the only light was the occasional spark. I glimpsed a huge man fighting against many foes, whose helmets were shaped like the snouts of wolves.

I tried to run away, but it was like pushing against an avalanche; and one of the wolf-knights bore me down and tore at me with fangs and claws. I rolled and swatted him with my book-bag, and felt my cloak torn away. I cried out for help then, and I am sure I would have died had not some immense force ripped the wolf-knight away. I heard a yelp, and bones crunching.

Then there was silence again, in the darkness.

And in the darkness, my invisible knight and I made camp. He sat far back beneath an overhanging tree while I struggled to get a fire started in the rain, couldn't do it, and prepared our supper cold.

He would not eat until I was finished. That was odd. We two sat in the cold and rain. I could smell his sweat and the almost sweet odor of wet leather and iron.

"You cannot have found your way out of the Endless Forest by yourself," he said at last, "for it is made anew by errors of mankind and races before us

like a tide."

I launched into a geographical discourse, about the absurdity of having an Endless Forest here in the isle of Britain, but he said to me, in a voice of infinite weariness, "Just shut up, Theophanes. Be instructed by the silence. If you cannot do that, at least tell me the tale how you came to be where I found you."

For once I had very little to say. I told him that Theophanes was not my real name, just a literary affectation.

"I knew that already, Petrus, son of Dagdanec," he said.

And I told him how I was the youngest of five sons to the Duke of a country so small no one has ever heard of it.

"It is called Aquilae," he said, "the Country of the Eagle."

I, the youngest and least favorite son of the Duke Dagdanec of the Eagle Land, who failed at chivalry through clumsiness or cowardice or a bit of both, who was filled with pride nonetheless, who sought fame as a poet, composing exquisite verses I fed into the fire nightly out of sheer mean-spiritedness—

"Are you sure they're as exquisite as all that?" he said.

In my pride I appeared before the whole court and told them I was bound for Camelot, where I would become bard to King Arthur himself. I recited

for them, unworthy though they were, some of the epic I had been composing. "And they laughed," said my invisible knight.

They fidgeted in their seats, politely silent, for I was, after all, still their lord's son, every once in a while glancing in my direction. The laughter began with the beautiful *Jeshute*, whom I had loved from afar, a lady of high estate herself, who served my mother the Duchess, to *Jeshute* to whom I dedicated my verses —

"Before you got into the habit of burning them —"

"She laughed, and broke my heart utterly, and all goodness was drained out of me, all faith in God, all everything —"

Then, to my amazement, he touched my hand tenderly, as if to comfort me, and he said, "That is truly as mighty a tale of suffering, of heroic deeds, of temptations and a fall, as any recorded

in the annals of chivalry —"

I drew away. "You ridicule me!" "I swear to you, Petrus, who would rather be called Theophanes, upon mine honor as a knight, that I do not ridicule your pain, which is to you as great as mine is to me, for losses are as one before the eyes of God, if we allow ourselves, as the Enemy counseled Job, to *despair and die*. Therefore I command you, despair not, and live."

"Will you tell me your own story?" "When it is time. Be patient."

We sat in the darkness. I felt my leather bag. It was empty.

"I've lost my books!" Doubtless they had fallen out in the struggle with the wolf-knights. I got up to search, but my knight hauled me back.

"You don't need any of them. Not even Isaac of Edessa."

Soon I was so cold I barely managed to gasp, "Master! I'm freezing. I'll die."

He took me in his hard, metal arms, as a father might embrace his son, and said only, "You shall not die, for a knight must look after his squire even as a squire must look after his knight."

A strange warmth arose from him, like gentle fire, and I slept, and dreamed, or perhaps awoke from one dream into another.

I began to think of him as *my knight*, though I betrayed him again at the first opportunity.

It happened like this:

I awoke, as I said, from one dream, of darkness, into another, of light and warmth.

I was on a ship, in the bright day,

surrounded by golden mist.

I stirred. The empty armor which still embraced me fell away into a heap. I looked up, but suddenly a maiden's voice spoke, commanding me to look down, to tend to my master's needs.

"But he's not here —" I started to protest.

"Petrus, would you deny him twice?"

And I was afraid again, for my name was known here too, though I had not told it. Twenty maidens in gowns of white samite danced in a circle around the mast of the ship to some impossible music I could feel but never quite hear, while the mast held up the slowly turning, golden sky as if it were the Axle of the World.

Seeing as much, of course, I had disobeyed. But I did not see any of the maidens' faces, because there was a light or glamour about them which my eyes could not penetrate.

Looking down at last, I found tools and cloths as I needed, and I cleansed and repaired my knight's armor, wiping away his own blood and that of his foes.

After a time, one of the maidens knelt down to offer me bread and wine, and I took them, and refreshed myself. She bade me gaze away from her, while she told me of my knight's adventure, how he had come to a castle of maidens dressed all in white, all of them wearing masks of white fire so he could not see their faces. They cried out to him, whether in fear or joy he knew not, and whether he was to rescue or ravish them remained uncertain to all concerned. A giant strode out of the castle, whether to challenge him or make him welcome no one ever knew; and the two of them fought, bravely and fiercely and long; and the giant opened his mouth and bade the knight to leap in, and the knight leapt, but, led on in the darkness by the thunderous drumming of the giant's heart, he struck with his sword until blood flowed around him like a burning sea —

And it was then that I realized that the maiden spoke with the voice of *Jeshute*, she whom I had loved, and she was not mocking me now, I was certain. She would rescue me from this slightly ridiculous predicament, and we would laugh about it while I formed the tale into a beautiful and somewhat satirical romance, feeding only the uninteresting parts into the fire, the parts I would have otherwise shared with the world. The core of the story, the



Artwork by Michael Kucharski



pearl beyond price, I would write out for *feshute* alone, to treasure in secret.

And it was then that I caught her by the wrist, and pulled her toward me, and lifted the glowing veil from her face, and made to kiss her in the full expression of my love — only she was foul, and shrunken, her face filled with worms.

I cried out in disgust.

She wept black, muddy tears, and gasped in a coarse and broken voice, "Petrus, traitor, you've done it again."

I awoke then, to the sound of wind and of sleet rattling on the ruined roof of my hovel.

I sat up. I coughed long and hard, for the cold was settling into my lungs. Possibly I coughed up blood.

My knight stirred beside me.

Bewildered beyond all words, I groped about for my books. Even if I couldn't read them in the darkness, and my knight had forbidden me light, at least I could heft the familiar masses of useless verbiage, and take comfort from that.

"You're looking for Isaac of Edessa," my knight said. "But don't you remem-

ber? You lost him on your journey."

"But we haven't gone anywhere."

"Oh no, my dear and foolish Petrus. Already we have travelled very far."

I huddled beneath my only blanket, miserable and afraid, while my knight told me of his many adventures and sufferings. They assumed a certain sameness: the loneliness of the quest, terrible wounds acquired while battling black or red knights, monsters. My memories became uncertain, and I was somehow sure that I had been in his service all throughout his adventures; and on a thousand different occasions he had departed unseen from my abode upon his quest, then returned, that I might repair his armor and prepare his meals and cleanse his wounds.

"Chivalry is pain," he said to me, "in the service of mankind."

"Who are you serving?"

"Myself, I suppose." He laughed bitterly, but not out of despair. Like Job he refused merely to curse God and die, and, however grudgingly, I had to admire him for that. "And whom do you serve, Petrus, called Theophanes?"

"The ... muses."

"By feeding your poetry into the flames?"

"That is perhaps my greatest service to them."

And my laughter was like his, tottering on the edge of despair without quite falling into the abyss. It echoed through the darkness in the Forest of Errors.

The episode in which I had been Dagdanec's brat, youngest son of the Duke of Nowhere You've Ever Heard of, that was the illusion. I was not the poet dreaming himself to be the squire, it seemed, but the squire dreaming, briefly, that he had been, in fact, a wretched poet, whose works deserved the flames.

I understood, too, that I had contributed to my knight's wounds by my treason. Each time I embraced falsehood, I drew him away from his goal.

Yet he held me in his arms as a father would, and he comforted me. I started to drift off into sleep once more.

"What are you questing for?" I asked him. "The Grail? Everybody seems to be looking for the Grail ..."

He rocked me back and forth, and he wept softly, and I was both amazed and embarrassed as he bared his soul

to me, as if to a confessor.

"Oh, I had the Grail at the very beginning," he said.

I shook myself fully awake.

"You found it?"

"No, good Petrus. I saw it, as we all did, on that terrible Pentecost, at Camelot, when the Grail floated through the room in a cloud of mystical light; and each man was satisfied with perfect wine and whatever meat he most desired, and a voice spoke to us in thunder, proclaiming, *Seek this for the renewal of the land and the forgiveness of sins*. And Arthur wept, because he knew we were all sinful men, and most of us would perish on the quest. I think he even begged God take this cup away from us, but God did not. Meanwhile, I was perhaps a bit drunk from too much of that perfect wine we'd had — and I thought, *I'll save us all a lot of trouble*, and I got up from the table and tried to seize the Grail right then and there. I actually touched it, and my hand was burned — if I were not invisible you could see the scar — and I became invisible then, not merely to the eye, but to the mind. No other knight would recognize my name now. To King Arthur I am perhaps a dream which leaves him uneasy upon awakening, though he has forgotten what he has dreamed. My name is not to be found in the chronicles, for I have no name, not even to myself. Only God has not forgotten me, and he speaks to me often, in visions, and he directs me on the course of my penitential quest."

"But to what end?" I asked him at last. "How will you be redeemed?"

And then he said something which pierced me to the very soul, and made me long for madness, that we two could be mad together and this might be no more than a lot of thunder and babbled nonsense.

"By the treason of another."

The next morning, it was still raining. I felt sick and exhausted from a thousand adventures I couldn't remember, as if I had suffered wounds in every one of them. And I saw before me on the floor a disorderly heap of junk, which was my knight's armor, without him in it.

My hands knew what to do. I no longer sought Isaac of Edessa, whom I had lost in the Forest of Error. Instead I repaired my master's armor, as a squire should.

That day, I was tempted three times.

Jeshute came to the door, veiled in light.

"Fly away with me," she said. "Leave this."

"Begone," I said. And she was gone.

A giant came to the door. I could see only his eyes when he leaned to peer in.

"Follow and serve me," he said.

"My master is greater than you," I said.

Isaac of Edessa stood before me, his filthy animal-skins soaked with rain, reeking. He handed me his book, saying, "You are swept along by that great river which is human striving. What you've got to do is climb up onto the bank and dry yourself out."

"It's raining," I said. "The roof leaks. Begone."

I cannot say when my soul changed, but it did, either then or earlier in the course of the many adventures I only remembered when my knight told me of them. Perhaps I, too, had been at Camelot and witnessed his fateful lunge for the Grail, and I too had become invisible with him. All I can say is that in the darkness of the returning night I heard his armor stir, as if filled by a wind, and then my knight was with me, and he put his hand beneath my arm and lifted me to my feet, saying, "Come, good squire, it is time for us to set out on our adventure."

And we mounted two steeds which awaited us beyond the door, he a huge black charger, I a smaller mare. We rode, not in the darkness through the Forest of Error in the rain, but by pale moonlight, across the Wasteland, where ash stretched to the horizon in all directions.

We came to a plain of bare stone, beneath the moon and the pale white stars, and the hooves of our horses threw off sparks like fading meteors. I saw my master beside me, huge as any giant, or I saw his armor anyway, which was given to me to see. His visor was down. I could not — I did not attempt to — gaze within and see his eyes.

"Look, there," he said at last.

We reigned our steeds and waited as one of the stars touched the horizon, then drove toward us; and I saw that it was not a star at all, but a champion in silver armor, wearing a mask of light; and somehow I knew that, however beautiful or striking his appearance might be, this was our foe, whom we must overcome to complete our quest.

The silver knight circled. I saw that he had many faces, and none, the light

of his mask shifting to form the face of a man, and a wolf, and a dragon, and even a maiden. He called to me in my father's voice, in Jeshute's, in Isaac of Edessa's, even in that of my master the invisible knight, but he spoke nothing and his voice was the wordless wind.

He circled, taunting. My master lowered his lance and the other lowered his. They crashed together. The lances broke. They smote one another with their swords. Sparks flew like stars. I drew my own weapon, the jeweled poniard I had once stolen, and tried to join in the combat.

But the silver knight unhorsed me with the backward sweep of his hand.

Then he and my master were far away, pursuing, turning, fighting.

I couldn't find my horse. I think I was blinded for a time, from blood where the enemy knight's hand had struck my forehead.

But I knew what I had to do. I followed, on foot, across the stone waste. I waded in red blood up to my knees. Once I walked upon the surface of a sea, but I did not sink. I came to a golden barge, and heard maidens singing. I saw my master and his foe lying in the barge as if they were both dead. I went to tend my master, but he raised himself on his elbow and pointed to the other and said, "Heal him first, for he is more hurt than I."

And I touched the other, and he was healed. We sailed together to an island, which rose like a black hump out of the sea. There was a white castle, in which the maidens dwelt. We feasted, though my master and his foe feasted behind a curtain, lest anyone see them. I heard them speaking together, not in anger or with taunts, but as if they were old friends.

I drank of heavenly wine, and ate of the perfect meat, and the room filled with light.

But when I got up from the table, I felt like a stone down a deep well, and found myself in the cold in the dark, inside my old hovel, in the forest.

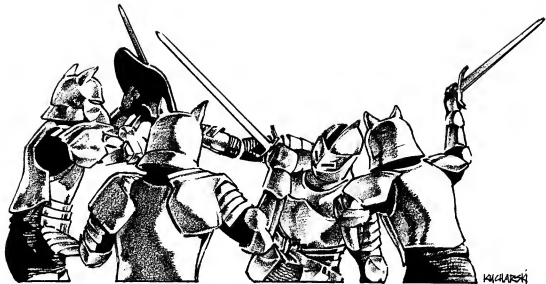
Almost without thinking, I lit a candle.

I cried out at what I saw.

The silver knight sat astride my master. He had seized him by the throat, and he shook him until I was certain he'd broken his neck.

"No!" I cried out. "You shall not slay him!"

I dropped the candle and drew my stolen poniard. I plunged it into the



silver knight's back. I let out a great cry. He was silent. I twisted the blade, plunging it deeper. I didn't care if this was chivalrous or not.

And silently, he died, or merely ceased, for he collapsed into a pile of junk. There was no corpse, only scraps of metal.

I swept them away. I relit my candle. I leaned down to touch my master's visor.

He spoke. What he said didn't make any sense at first.

"You've still got my purse of coins." I thought he was delicious.

"Of course I knew that all along, but I thought of you as my treasurer, holding my wealth for safekeeping. Now, I think, as you go on, you will need it more than I. The poniard proved useful too, I see."

I wept then, and reached for his visor, to raise it.

"Petrus, would you betray me three times?"

"Yes," I said, between my sobs, "I can't help it." I said this because I knew somehow that he was already dead.

So, did I betray him?

I raised his visor. The face there was fully visible. It was that of an ordinary man, with gray in his beard, his features lined by privation and pain.

I just wanted to see.

This was holy treason, committed out of love.

And what then? Say the dream of the Endless Quest raced forward like a tide. Say that I bore my master into the forest, until I reached a clearing where once we had battled the wolf-knights around a stone, on which was carved the image of a knight in repose. Say that I had carved that image myself, somewhere in the course of my adventures, and that it was Petrus called Theophanes whom I buried beneath it, for surely he ceased to exist that day, and I, who wore my master's armor, who impersonated him in all things, went forth upon my master's quest. He, of course, could only be redeemed by God, in Heaven, but here on Earth his purpose had been to save the world from any more bad verse, whether tossed into the fire or otherwise.

Say only that I rode forth and had many adventures and suffered many wounds, all the while working my way back to Camelot like a woodsman chopping through a tangle of thorns, so that the Invisible Knight might once more sit at the Round Table and rediscover his name, and serve King Arthur in a manner and through such deeds as are worth writing down.

DARRELL SCHWEITZER is still the editor of *Weird Tales*. His latest books are **NECROMANCIES AND NETHERWORLDS**, a collection of his collaborations with Jason Van Hollander (including one from *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*) published by Wildside Press, and **REFUGEES FROM AN IMAGINARY COUNTRY**, a collection of his own solo stories (including another one from *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*) published by Owlswick Press. Other recent publications include a collection of essays, **WINDOWS OF THE IMAGINATION** (Wildside Press), and a chapbook of eldritch verse, **STOP ME BEFORE I DO IT AGAIN!** (Zadok Allen: Publisher). The SF Book Club has reprinted (actually done the first American edition of) **THE MASK OF THE SORCEROR**.

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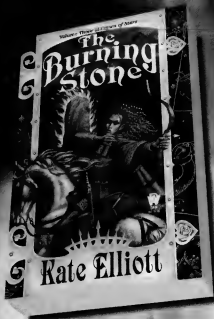
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Tante Hélène

by Patricia Russo

Travel changes a person.

Not ten months ago, outside a village in Sardinia I'd been shown something the natives called an oracle-tree, whose boughs were hung with the severed heads of horses and oxen. A few leagues further inland, I saw one garlanded with the heads of young women. In Gascony, I'd come across a thoroughly repulsive water demon. I'd even encountered dragons, in the Vosges mountains of all places. Plus, after one had been initiated into the mysteries of swine-neutering, all other horrors paled. I considered myself a hardened man, one not easily shaken.

Or so I thought until I saw the coat of arms on the carriage which had broken down on the road between Pithiviers and Fontainebleau.

The blood drained from my face. I couldn't breathe. If the earth had opened up and swallowed me, I would have kissed it a thousand times and

thanked it with all my heart.

Unfortunately, the earth was not in an ingesting mood that day.

"Jouffroi?" Dimly, I heard Thibault addressing me; I even registered the alarm in his voice.

I couldn't move. I did manage to make a sound. "Argh," I said.

"Jouffroi, are you all right?"

"Urrk," I replied.

The carriage had slipped an axle. The driver had unhitched the horses and now stood with them a little apart, watching two footmen scratch their heads and swear at each other.

Thibault dropped his bag. Mine had already thudded to the dirt. Grabbing my arm, he shook me hard. "Jouffroi, what's the matter with you?"

Jolted from my paralysis, I sucked in air. "Run," I cried. "For the love of heaven, Thibault, run!"

He gaped at me.

A young woman peered out of the

carriage, and for a second I thought I was a fool, panicking over nothing. It was a second of cruel, giddy relief, shattered an instant later when the first woman drew back and another stuck her head out.

A woman of a certain age, and a certain bulk, who made no concession to the rigors of travel in a closed carriage. She wore gray shot-silk, embroidered with a sea of lace; a jeweled aigrette adorned her elaborate wig. Gold earrings set with emeralds hung from her fleshy lobes. Her face was painted one degree less grotesquely than a New Year's masquer's.

She stared at me through narrowed eyes. Trembling, I prayed that the ten years that had passed since we'd last met had so altered me she wouldn't know who the blazes I was.

No such luck.

She raised a painted eyebrow. She smiled a narrow smile. "My dear

Jouffroi," she said. "So you're not dead after all."

"No, Tante Hélène," I whispered.

"Sit."

The maid had spread a rug on the grassy verge and arranged a double-armful of cushions and bolsters from the carriage on it. My aunt carefully settled herself amidst the pillows. The maid placed a large hamper beside her, then stood behind Tante Hélène, shielding her countenance from the midmorning sun with a peacock-blue parasol.

"Oh, no, Tante Hélène," I said rapidly. "I can't stop. I'm afraid I have an urgent appointment in —"

"Sit."

"This is a perilous area in which to tarry," I tried. "There are wolves, and wild boars, and — and bears."

She fixed me with a steely blue eye. "You always did have an excessive imagination."

"There are so bears," I said.

"Sit down, Jouffroi."

I collapsed on a cushion, muttering under my breath.

"And stop mumbling."

Thibault, I was chagrined to see, looked amused. He'd gathered our bags together, and now took up a spot behind me, in imitation of my aunt's maid.

Tante Hélène opened the hamper. She extricated napkins, china, cut-glass goblets, a basket of small white loaves, a whole roasted chicken, and a bottle of wine. She always did believe in traveling well-provisioned.

"So," she said. "Finished your studies?"

"Yes, Tante Hélène. I'm a Master of Arts."

"You've put it to good use, I see." I winced.

Dismembering the fowl expertly with a small knife, she loaded a plate and handed it to me. I was about to thank her when she said, "For your man. I assume the youth standing behind you is your servant?"

"Yes, Tante Hélène."

"The way you're dressed, it's hard to tell."

I thrust the plate at Thibault. He took it with alacrity. "Thank you very

much," he said cheerfully.

"You're very welcome." The steely blue eye came back to me. "So where are you going?"

I cleared my throat. "Fontainebleau, first, and then on to —"

"Oh, no. No, that won't do at all." She chewed a bite of chicken thoughtfully.

I'd once read that condemned prisoners, if fortunate, achieved a state of resignation the moment before the ax fell. I felt myself sinking into just such



a state.

I did my best to strive against it. Tante Hélène had been one of the major terrors of my childhood, and considering my childhood that was saying something. But I was a grown man now. And who was she, anyway, that I should quail before her? A wealthy widow with a cutting tongue, that was all. But in her presence I felt eight years old again.

"It's a stroke of luck running into you," she said. "You shall have the honor of doing me a small service." I saw the glimmer in her eye. She was enjoying making me squirm like a worm on a pin. She hadn't changed a bit.

"Don't look so stricken, it's nothing difficult. All I want is for you to brew me up a love philtre."

My jaw dropped.

She sniffed. "That is an extremely unattractive expression, Jouffroi. Adjust it."

I shut my jaw. I cleared my throat. "A love philtre?"

Quite astonishingly, Tante Hélène blushed. It was very faint, and almost invisible under her face-paint, but undeniably a blush.

"Yes, yes. A potion, an elixir. Surely that shouldn't be beyond the capacity of a Master of Arts?"

"No, um. No." I did not dare ask her what she wanted one for. I decided it was none of my business.

"Surely an aunt has the right to ask a service from her nephew. You would not deny me this simple request?"

"No," I muttered. "Of course not."

Why was I being such a spineless poltroon? Tante Hélène had no authority over me. She couldn't make me do anything.

"Sit up straight," she said.

I sat up straight, and cursed myself silently.

"You have caused your family a lot of worry, Jouffroi. Are you aware of that?" Tearing a white roll in two, she pinched out the soft crumb. "No word from you for years. Very inconsiderate. Your sister Aimée married that cretin Legrand. No children yet. But Jean-Etienne has four, all girls. So you're an uncle, if that's of any interest to you."

Not particularly, no. I managed a strained smile.

"Just last month I received a letter from Jérôme," she said, casually. "In passing, he asked if I'd heard any news of you. It's shocking the way I've let my correspondence lapse. You know, I haven't replied to him yet?"

Oh, sacré dieu. My brother Jérôme despised me. He believed scholarship was for eunuchs, and the study of natural science and mathematics for necromancers, and thought my pursuing these fields of study a black mark on the family honor. The oldest son, he'd been head of the family most of my life, for our father had died when I was a very little boy. As such, he'd torn up

my notebooks, burned texts I'd bought with my own money, and, when I was older, swore that if I persisted in my desire to attend university, he'd personally break my neck.

If I fell into his hands, I had no doubt Jérôme would shut me up somewhere dank and dark and altogether unpleasant, especially if he learned of some of the things I had done over the past several years. He'd consider my activities shameful, and to scrub the shame from the family name, he'd immure me somewhere for a while, and then, quite probably, have me killed. And think himself fully justified, for in his mind a murdered brother would be a far smaller disgrace to have to own up to than a live, necromancing one.

I stared at my aunt, horror-struck. "You wouldn't. Please, Tante Hélène, you wouldn't."

"Of course I wouldn't," she said, her eyes glittering.

A coal of anger started to burn inside me. She would use me thus, with scorn and threats? Fine. Then I would treat her with no greater respect. If I must suffer myself to be ill-used, at least I would insure that I was well-paid. "Of course I will make up a love philtre for you, Tante Hélène. But I shall need supplies. I'll have to purchase a number of powders and herbs, and for that I'll require money."

Thibault coughed.

"How much money?"

"Well, the best quality ingredients cost more. But then, you want the best, don't you?"

Thibault coughed again.

I turned. "Are you choking on a chicken bone?"

"No, Magister Jouffroi."

"Then kindly keep quiet."

When I turned back to my aunt, she was smiling. "Very well," she said. "I shall advance you a few *livres*. Will that do?"

"Oh yes, that will do very nicely, Tante Hélène," I said, and made myself smile back.

It was nearly noon before the axle was repaired, the picnic packed away, and Tante Hélène resettled in her carriage. She gave me detailed directions to the estate of the Marquis de Monteberne, where she was staying as

a guest.

"When you come, say you are servants I have sent for from my country house in Dijon. Both of you. You comprehend, Jouffroi?"

I comprehended, all right.

The carriage rattled off, and Thibault and I began to retrace our steps.

"Jouffroi?"

"Yes."

"We don't have to go back to Pithiviers. We have everything we need."



"No, we don't."

"Yes, we do. We have elecampagne, we have vervain, we have mistletoe berries. We have coriander and cumins seeds. All we need is a bit of spit or sweat or, um, blood, from your aunt —"

"We don't have any mandrake root."

"Yes, we do."

I halted. I turned. I said, "Shut up, Thibault."

A stubborn expression settled over his face. "I don't understand. You're not planning to run out on your aunt, are you?"

"No." Not with the threat of Jérôme hanging over me. "See this money, Thibault?" I jingled the purse at him. "I'm going to Pithiviers to spend it. I

desire to purchase some decent clothing and a horse. When I have finished spending this money, I shall make Tante Hélène her love potion."

"That's not right," he said. "You shouldn't take advantage of your aunt that way."

I could not believe what I was hearing.

"I like her," Thibault said.

"You-you-you —" I stopped. I swallowed. "You what?"

"I like your aunt. She's a fine woman. She reminds me of my grandmother," he said tenderly.

"If your grandmother is anything like my aunt, you have my condolences."

"Why would you say something like that?" he said in a wounded tone. "I love my grandmother."

"I'm going to Pithiviers."

"You can buy better clothes in Paris, once we get there. Why waste money here?" He lifted a shoulder. "You're going to have to pretend to be a servant anyway, no matter how you're dressed." Pointing off toward a grove at the foot of a low hillcock perhaps half a league from the road, he said, "We could prepare the potion there. I'll build a little fire. Those trees will shield us from view."

I clenched my teeth. I shook my head. But Thibault was right. I hated it when he was right.

Something struck me. "How do you know so much about love philtres, anyway?"

"Sometimes when you're asleep, I read your books," he said. Before I could collect myself enough to explode in outrage, he burst into hearty laughter. "I'm joking! Everything I know I learned from my grandmother."

"Your beloved grandmother."

"That's right."

I wondered. I seriously wondered. As we strode toward the grove, I determined to secure my books more carefully in future. Not that there was any great harm in them, but Thibault was a peasant, and some things were best kept in responsible hands. A little knowledge, as they say, was a dangerous thing.

I had no doubt the home of le Mar-



quis de Monteborne was a grand dwelling, full of exquisite furnishings and costly and beautiful accoutrements. Unfortunately I didn't get to see any of it from the servant's quarters.

They'd bunged Thibault and me in with three scullery boys and a boot-black, all of whom were at present snoring loudly. Through one of her footmen, Tante Hélène had conveyed the message to present myself, with the potion, in her rooms once the house was quiet.

I figured this was as quiet as the house was going to get. I nudged Thibault. "Come on. Let's go."

We crept from the servant's quarters, up an unlighted back staircase, and through what seemed like several leagues of drafty passages illuminated only by the occasional flickering wall sconce before we reached the antechamber of my aunt's suite of rooms. The footmen were asleep on pallets; Thibault and I stepped over them with care, and I knocked softly on the inner door.

The maid opened to us, yawning, and we slipped inside.

"It took you long enough," Tante Hélène growled.

I declined to respond to that. Besides, the sight of Tante Hélène in her night attire was one from which I wished to remove myself with the utmost expediency.

I had the philtre in a stoppered vial

in my pocket. I withdrew it and gave it to her. "Attend carefully, now, Tante Hélène. For the potion to be effective, you must add a bit of your saliva or, er, perspiration, or blood to it. Then mix it with wine, and have the object of your affections imbibe it."

She held the vial between finger and thumb, peering at the contents skeptically. "And it will work?"

"Oh yes, without a doubt."

"Wait here," she said, and retired to her chamber of comfort.

I looked at Thibault. Thibault looked at me. We both looked at the maid, but she'd nodded off on the padded bench at the foot of the canopied bed.

My aunt returned and handed me the vial. "All right. He's in the library. He always is, this time of night. Poor man has trouble sleeping."

"What?" I tried to give the vial back, but she wouldn't take it.

"You don't expect me to do it, do you?"

"You don't expect me to," I yelped.

"I do indeed." The steely eyes glittered. "You'll find some wine in that chest there."

"Tante Hélène, I don't even know who it is!"

"Why, the marquis, of course," she said blandly.

Of course.

She opened the chest. "Oh, yes, this one will do. Must you mix it with the whole bottle, or will a glass suffice?"

"I'm not going to do this, Tante Hélène. This is your business, not mine. Besides, why in the world would the marquis accept wine from me? A glass," I said, shrinking under her iron glare.

She poured out half a goblet and set it on a tray. "You'll present it as a gift from me. Wine from my private stock. You will beg him to do me the honor of tasting it." She emptied the vial into the goblet and stirred the liquid with her finger.

"You could do that very well yourself."

"My womanly modesty forbids it," she said, sternly. "How long does this concoction take to work?"

"Not long," I sighed. "A few moments."

She nodded. "Then I shall come to the library shortly."

"Dressed like that?"

"I will thank you to keep your opinions on my corset *de nuit* to yourself." She handed me the tray.

"Mind if we take a candle?" Thibault asked.

"Not at all," my aunt said. "Take the whole stand, if you like."

The library, Tante Hélène informed me, was located on the ground floor of the house, overlooking the gardens. Back we crept down the stairs, I balancing the tray, and Thibault clutching the base of an overloaded candle tree.

As we descended, I prepared my

speech. My lord, please condescend to accept this token of esteem ... no. My lady commands me to present to you this cup, in hopes that ... No, that was dreadful.

"Just bow and say, 'A gift from my lady Hélène,'" Thibault suggested.

"I hate it when you do that."

"What?"

"Pretend to know what I'm thinking."

"Oh." He paused. "Sorry."

As it turned out, I'd wracked my brain to no purpose, for when Thibault eased open the door of the library and I peered in, the marquis wasn't there.

What was there was a nicely polished oak table, some very comfortable looking chairs, two six-foot candle trees uneconomically blazing away, and several shelves of books. On the table, an open volume, a plate of sweets, and a goblet.

A wine goblet.

With wine in it.

That gave me an idea.

Setting down the tray, I took the goblet from the table, hurried to the window, flung it open, and upended the goblet. Relatching the window, I dashed back to the table, poured the contents of my goblet into the empty one, then replaced it exactly where it had stood before. Sticking the tray under my arm, I turned to make a run for the door.

Someone said, "Ahem."

Oh, no.

"Pardon me, but would you care to explain who you are, and what the blazes you are doing here?"

"We're dead, aren't we?" I said to Thibault.

"I think so," he replied. White-faced, he set down the candle stand. I turned around.

The Marquis de Monteborne, who had evidently entered by the door I now noticed stood ajar to the left of the windows, regarded me grimly. He was a tall, spare man of middle years and regular features, but nothing, I thought

to waste a love philtre on. But then there was no accounting for taste.

"Poisoners are generally drawn and quartered," he said in an even voice. "But I'm a merciful man. I believe I will simply have you hanged."

Good, I thought. Splendid. Wonderful. If only he'd do it before Tante Hélène walked in.

"It's not poison, um — Jouffroi, what do I call him?"

"You call him 'my lord,'" I said.

"It's not poison, my lord. Simply an elixir. A gift from his aunt."

De Monteborne frowned. "His aunt?"

"His aunt Hélène."

"His aunt Hélène —" De Monteborne clicked his teeth shut. He peered at me closely. Uncomfortably closely. "His aunt Hélène," he said, in another tone. Then, sharply: "What sort of elixir?"

"A love philtre," I mumbled.

"A what? Speak up so I can understand you."

"A love philtre."

"The lady is enamored with you, my



Artwork by Margaret Organ-Keen

lord," Thibault said. "She feared you did not return her feelings, so ..."

De Monteberte picked up the goblet. He stared at the liquid within, then sniffed it. "Is this a joke?"

"No, my lord," I said.

"She loves me?"

"I'm afraid so, my lord."

"Which nephew are you?"

"Jouffroi Marcoux, my lord."

"Ah," He nodded. "The alchemist. Oh, don't look so surprised. Your aunt and I are old acquaintances. She's spoken of you on more than one occasion."

"I — I'm gratified, my lord." I was also flabbergasted, but there was no point bringing that up.

"Listen," the marquis said, rubbing his chin. "What does this potion do?"

I was surprised at the turn the conversation had taken, but at least he'd abandoned hanging as a topic of discourse. "My lord, it is a philtre to engender warm emotions. The man that drinks that will come to feel a great affection burgeon in his breast, and within a short period of time that affection will deepen into an abiding attachment."

"You know, the usual thing," Thibault said. "My lord."

"Not passion," he said. "Not lust. Warm feelings, and an abiding attachment?"

"Just so, my lord." Passion and lust necessitated an entirely different formula. The vision of a passionate and lustful Tante Hélène rose in my mind. I banished it with a shudder.

"Well, that's something to be thankful for," he murmured. The marquis stood for a moment looking at the goblet. Then he sighed. "Oh, very well then," he said, and drank it down.

After a moment, he said, "Close your mouth, young man, you're catching flies." He set the goblet on the table, then gave me a wry smile. "Your aunt, as you probably know, has the happiness to enjoy a more than modest income. In fact, she's the richest widow under sixty that I have the honor to be acquainted with. I'd thought of proposing marriage more than once, but there was an impediment." His smile faded. "I can't stand the woman."

I could certainly understand that. "But then — but why —"

"Because needs must, young man. Unfortunately, I have suffered several financial, er, embarrassments in recent years. It's either this or let the creditors pillage my holdings. Now, true, there

are many marriages in which neither party feels any stirring of emotion toward the other, and I had just about made up my mind to ... declare myself to your aunt. But this struck me as the less painful option. I mean, if I had to, I had to. But every time that woman comes near me, I get this fearful knot in my stomach. The thought of living with a fearful knot in one's stomach for ten or fifteen or even twenty more years was not a pleasant one."

I imagined not.

"I suppose I should thank you," he said. "If this works."

"No thanks are necessary, my lord," I said, faintly.

A few moments later Tante Hélène entered the library, and we discovered that the love philtre did, indeed, work. Poor man.

The next morning Thibault and I attempted to depart quietly, but we were intercepted by my aunt's footman. She wanted to see me.

A cold chill ran up my spine. What now?

Oh, no. Not the potion to engender passion. Please, anything but that.

"Maybe she just wants to thank you," Thibault said.

"I doubt it. Thibault, the next time I tell you to run, run. Remember that."

She was in her bedchamber, but she didn't look like she'd had much sleep. I gathered that my aunt had managed to engender a significant quantity of passion all on her own. "Felicitations, Tante Hélène," I said, with as much cheer as I could muster. "And good day to you. Unfortunately I cannot stay and chat long, for I have an urgent appointment in —"

"Save it," she said. "And forget your urgent appointment. Here, take this." She tossed me a folded sheet, secured by her seal.

"What is it?"

"A letter of introduction. Present it, with my compliments, to le Comte de la Halle. I have a feeling he could find a use for a man of your ... talents."

De la Halle? De la Halle was a major figure at court. Surely she was jesting. Surely she was merely playing a cruel trick.

"It's real," she said. "I don't promise he'll take you on, of course, but it's a foot in the door."

"I-I —"

"Oh, just thank me and go."

I thanked her. I thanked her pro-

fusely. I thanked her exuberantly. And I congratulated her on her upcoming marriage.

"Marriage? What marriage?"

"To the marquis. He told me last night —"

"Good lord, I'm not going to marry the man. Whyever would I? Rising from her chair, she shook her head, as if she could not credit my idiocy. "I'm a childless widow, control my own fortune, run my own affairs, manage my own properties. Why would I marry someone? To hand everything over to him?"

"Oh," I said.

"Come here and kiss me goodbye," she said.

I took her hands, bent my head to kiss her cheek. As I straightened, she said, "You should be happy I will never marry. After all, you're my favorite nephew."

It took me a moment to grasp the import of what she'd said. "You mean I'm in the will?"

"Well," she said, "you are now."

My head spinning, I took my leave from Tante Hélène, and hurried down to the servant's quarters to tell Thibault that at long last, our luck had finally changed. As I trotted lightly down the stairs, I began to whistle, and not even the thought of the unfortunate marquis and the disillusion in store for him could still the music in my heart. *



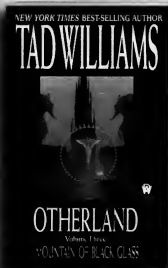
Photo by Cira Russo

PATRICIA
RUSSO's stories have appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*, the Tor anthology **WOMEN OF DARKNESS**, and

in the Meadowbrook Press anthology series **GIRLS TO THE RESCUE**. "Tante Helene" is one of a series of stories about Jouffroi and Thibault (a previous one, "Dragons, Domestiques et Sauvages," appeared in *MZBFM* #42). She hopes to continue J&T's adventures some day, as she likes these guys a lot.

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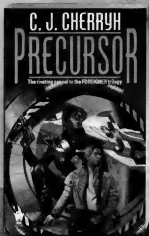
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THE SELKIE'S TALE

by Laura J. Underwood

The acrid scent of the peat fire filled the main room of the crofter's cottage, stinging Conor Manahan's eyes a bit. It had been years since he had smelled such a fire, and it brought back warm memories of his youth as he listened to the wind and the distant crash of waves upon the shore, mixed with the murmurs of the menfolk around him.

The moans of a woman in labor echoed from the next room where Conor's wife Eithne assisted the birth of a bairn. Each time the woman gave a cry, Rhojd, who had claimed his favorite place in Conor's lap, would cringe. The mageborn lad's blue eyes were not on the fire or the menfolk gathered in the cottage to await the birth. They settled instead on the pale grey pelt hanging from a peg in one of the rafter beams.

"Is that a seal skin?" the lad asked.

Conor saw his nervous host stretch a bit of a grin. Being a new father was a moment he apparently looked forward to. "Maybe," Conor said. "Then again, it might just be a selkie."

Rhojd made a face. "What's a selkie?" Conor smiled in response. "Sea folk," he said.

"You mean, people actually live in the sea?" Rhojd said.

His face glowed with a wonder equal to what it had worn that afternoon. Eithne had sensed a "need" as True Healers were wont to do, and brought them to this croft not far from the Keltoran shores. There, they found a woman whose first labor was not going to be easy, and a knot of neighbors trying to reassure the father-to-be. Eithne had muttered about menfolk getting underfoot, and the years of marriage had readily taught Conor

when it was wise to stay out of his healer wife's way. So he took Rhojd for a walk, and knew from the expression that brightened the mageborn lad's face with a nine-year-old's fresh wonder that Rhojd had never seen the sea-shore before.

Naturally, he wanted to go down to the strand for a closer look at the crashing waves, but Conor said no, pointing to the seals who basked on the rocks and the sands. A massive bull watched over his harem of cows, and several young males tore at one another from time to time. Conor had grown up further north in the Keltoran seaport town of Seanbrae. He knew all about the dangers of seals. Gentle shy creatures they might be at a glance, but when cows were in season or birthing pups, the bulls could be as fierce as battlelords.

"But how can people live in the sea?" Rhojd insisted, bringing Conor back to the present. "Is it magic?"

"Of a sort," Conor said, well aware that his adopted son's interest there went beyond a normal lad's curiosity. As one of the mageborn, all things magical were Rhojd's first love, especially Conor's stories. "Sea folk have their way. Some say they can live forever, just like the Old Ones did, no matter what form they wear, but the strongest magic they possess is in their skins."

As if on cue, one of the crofter's kin drew the pelt from the peg and handed it over for Rhojd's inspection. Conor watched Rhojd run fingers across the silky surface. The lad made a face as though noticing something no mortalborn man could see.

"I once heard tell around these parts that folk say the sea folk were once like us and lived upon the land," Conor said. "But long ago, when the Old Ones and the Dark Ones warred, the land became a dangerous place, so the Chief of the Sea Folk went to the Lord of the Old Ones and asked a boon. 'Give us the sea,' he said, 'that we might be safe from your petty wars.'"

"Now, the Lord of the Old Ones was as wise as he was ancient and possessed great powers over the world. Loving the sea folk as he did, he granted the boon, giving the sea folk these skins so that they might live in the water. But he told them that any time they wished to return to walk upon the land among their mortal kin, they had only to crawl upon the shore and remove their skins."

"You mean they pull these off?" Rhojd said, fingering the eyeholes and looking disturbed. "Does it hurt?"

"Oh, no," Conor said with a reassuring hug and pushed stray black strands of the lad's long hair aside where they tickled Conor's chin. "And best of all, if they put the skin back on, they can return to the sea."

"What happens if they lose their skin?" Rhojd asked, tenderly stroking the pelt as though it were alive. And Conor could feel the lad using his mage senses to scry the skin. The quiet magic felt like a warm buzz to Conor, a faint breeze tickling the small hairs.

"Tell me," Rhojd said.

"It's a bit of a sad tale," Conor said. The lad hesitated. "I won't cry," came the hopeful reply.

"Oh, then you're a brave lad," Conor said. "Now the story I heard told in these parts when I was a lad goes that



once there was a beautiful woman of the sea folk who gave birth to a fine young lad. And oh, she was so proud of him. Daily, she took him to the shore with her kinfolk and helped him pull away his skin so he could play as lads do. Then come the gloaming, she would help the lad back into his skin, and together, they would go back to the sea.

"Now it happened that above the shore where the sea folk played, there lived an old fisherman and his young son. That lad was full of the mischief of youth, and not a day went by that he did not vex his father sore as some lads are wont to do ..."

"Not me," Rhoyd insisted, and Conor smiled.

"No, not you," Conor agreed. "You vex me so rare, I can't always remember from one time to the next whether I should dust yer trews or not. And besides, I know a better way to deal with vexing lads ..." His wriggling fingers found small ribs. Rhoyd squirmed with laughter, losing hold of the skin.

One of the crofter's kinsmen deftly caught it and returned it to the peg. "Yield?" Conor called.

"Yes!" Rhoyd said, breathless with giggling and leaning back into Conor.

"Good, because otherwise, I shall be too tired from all this vexing work to finish my tale," Conor teased.

Rhoyd went still as stone, and the crofter's kin traded knowing smiles.

"Now it happened that this lad was always running off to escape his chores, and on that day, he found the cove where the sea folk came to play. He watched them as they came ashore. Watched as they pulled off their skins and hid them among the rocks. And being a lad of such vexing nature, he decided that he wanted one of those skins. So, silent as a cloud, he slipped down from the cliffs on an old path and crept up to where the sea folk had left their skins. There, he searched among the stones until he found one, a very small one, but it had such a silvery shine and was so soft, he knew it was the best. Swift as a hawk, he stole the

skin and ran home with his prize.

"The sun was starting to go away. The sea folk knew they had to return to the watery depths, and so they began to gather their skins and pull them on. Imagine then the mother's surprise when she found her son's skin had vanished. Frantically, she searched among the rocks to no avail. It was then that the great bull gave a cry, warning his cows that hunters were on the shore. The mother had no choice. She pulled on her skin and fled into the sea, leaving her son behind.

"Well, the hunters came, and while they found no seals, they did find a wee laddie weeping at the water's edge. They gathered him up in their plaids, and took him to their womenfolk. But everyone knows such a foundling lad will ne'er stay with them. Indeed, he disappeared in the night, never to be seen among them again.

"Some will tell you that when you walk the shore at night when the moon is bright, you will see a small lad running up and down the sands above the

tide. Sometimes you hear the sound of his sobs beneath the sands as you walk across them. And the lonely cry of the gulls 'tis but a mockery of the wail of his grieving mother ..."

Rhoyd was so still, Conor thought the lad had gone to sleep. But Conor felt those muscles tense. The lad leaned forward and cast an accusing glower at their host.

"Where did you get that skin?" Rhoyd asked.

The crofter looked a little startled to hear such a vehement question thrown his way by one so young. He shrugged and fluttered a smile. "'Tis been here since before my grandfather's great grandfather's time," he said. "Have no fear, lad. Like as not, it was taken for the meat."

"No, it wasn't," Rhoyd said. "There's no death on it ..."

But before anyone could ask what the lad meant by that, the wail of a newborn rang. The crofter rose, drawing his long knife and pulling loose the shoulder end of his plaidie as he rushed for the bedchamber door. It opened to reveal Eithne holding a naked babe still slick from birth.

"Sir, it is a son," she said.

With a joyous cry, the crofter cut free two double ells of his plaidie, and taking the babe, he wrapped it in the warm wool. Then he hurried back to his kinfolk, showing them the bundle as though he'd birthed it himself, while Eithne went back to attend the mother. Conor shook his head and smiled as he remembered feeling much the same when his own true son was born.

Rhoyd, however, was not watching. His eyes had gone back to the skin. He seemed oblivious to the noise that rose as men shouted their congratulations. The womenfolk quickly began to set food and drink out for the men. Conor carried Rhoyd to the table and sat him there, but the lad ate only when told to, never wavering his intent stare.

Conor knew that look. Something was bothering the lad deeply. "Rhoyd, what do you see?" Conor finally asked when his curiosity could take no more.

"Sorrow," Rhoyd said.

"On this house, lad?" Conor asked, looking about and hoping no one else heard. The last thing he wanted was for these folk to look at his small adopted son as some harbinger of doom. Keltorans, while more open to magic and mageborn, still had their superstitions about omens and births.

But Rhoyd merely shook his head and looked down at his food. "He wants to go home," he said softly.

"Who, lad?"

"The boy who sleeps under the sands," Rhoyd said.

Conor made a face, for that was as befuddling an answer as he'd ever heard. "What boy?" he insisted.

"The boy from the sea. The one whose skin they stole."

Conor shook his head and sighed. "It was only a story, lad."

Rhoyd refused to look up again after that, and the noise of the celebration led Conor's thoughts astray.

The feasting progressed, and soon enough men scattered to their homes. The crofter insisted Conor and his small family should stay the night, and left them in the main room before the hearth. Rhoyd remained silent the whole time. He curled up in his makeshift pallet without being told to do so.

The lad's tired, Conor thought. Salt air did that to some.

Conor slipped into the larger pallet

next to Eithne in the gloomy shadows of the lowering fire. She too was sleepy, and curled up in his arms, her breath soft on his skin. Conor relished the comfort of having her close, and thought back once more to the time when his own son had been born. How he had cut his own plaidie to wrap little Taran — the same bit of plaidie now moldering in his son's cairn. Conor had so wanted another son to ease the loss, but he would not tell Eithne so. She could give him no more after Taran's birth, forcing Conor to hold that desire inside himself so long, it ached and left him cold and bitter.

Then, Rhoyd came into their lives, an abused mageborn child just wanting someone to love and care for him. Conor took that task to heart, and Rhoyd responded, growing out of the worst of his fears. But the lad was still one of the mageborn, inheriting arcane powers from the Old Ones from whom all his kind were said to descend. Because of the magic in his blood, he would be a lad a long time.



"I shall be old, grey and toothless by the time he's ready to get sons of his own," Conor once told his wife.

"Then we shall be old, grey and toothless together, won't we," Eithne had said softly in reply.

Conor smiled and closed his eyes, drifting away from those thoughts ...

Until the thump of wood on wood awoke him with a start.

Conor sat up, and Eithne barely stirred, so deep did she sleep. With a frown, Conor shot a glance over to Rhoyd's pallet to assure himself the lad was all right ...

Empty.

Unease surged through Conor as he rose. Likely, the lad had just gone to relieve himself. And yet, as Conor scanned the room further, he could not shake his dread. Especially when he saw that the pelt was gone as well.

Horns, what was the lad up to now? Conor hurried into his clothes and wrapped his plaidie around him. Sword and scabbard in hand, he rushed out into the night.

The moon was high, and the world was awash with the brilliant light. Here and there, dark bits of cloud scudded across the indigo sky, dancing in the sea wind that lashed at Conor's plaidie and long red hair. He found no immediate sign of the lad and, in desperation, Conor took the path that led to the cliffs. There he paused to look out upon the sea.

The seals were everywhere, and making way down the path toward them was a small lad carrying a pelt.

"Rhoyd!" Conor shouted, but the wind just slapped his voice back in his face. He lurched forward, heading for that thicket that led to the shore.

Horns, didn't the lad know better? The seals would likely attack him if they thought him a threat ...

By the time Conor was halfway down, his urgent fears began to loom as all too possible. Rhoyd had reached the sands. He strode purposely towards the pod. Conor forced himself to a quicker pace, and nearly lost his footing more than once as he raced down to the beach. He lunged atop a rough rock, determined to reach the lad.

And froze.

Rhoyd stood but twice his own height from the giant bull, looking as fearless and eldritch as the Old Ones. The beast was more than five times the lad's size, a great grey warrior with one eye gone. And yet, he did not attack, but reared

over the lad, swaying back and forth as Rhoyd held out the skin like an offering.

As Conor watched, the great bull turned and barked, and a smaller cow came lumbering swiftly across the sand. She sniffed the skin, then suddenly started wriggling and twisting until her own fell away, leaving a woman with long dark hair, and milky skin wet in the moonlight. She had tears in her eyes as she took the skin and drew it close. One of her hands reached out to touch Rhoyd's face. Then throwing back her head, she gave a call that rang off the cliffs.

A child's voice answered with a cry of joy. Conor started, reaching for his sword, when he saw the sands shift and slide apart to reveal a small naked lad who came leaping out of those depths. The boy ran to the woman, arms stretched wide. She drew him close in a warm embrace, then slipped the skin over him. Suddenly, a young seal was there, lumbering across the sands. Once more, the woman touched Rhoyd's face. She smiled and offered him a sea shell that seemed to sparkle in the dark. Then pulling on her own skin, she turned away, once more a seal, and followed her son to the water.

The pod slowly retreated, heading out to sea. Rhoyd stood there for quite some time, watching their departure. Unsure of what else to do, Conor seated himself on the rocks to wait.

At last, Rhoyd turned, studying the shell, only to hesitate when he saw Conor's stoic mask. The lad dropped his face in shame. Conor eased himself off the rocks and crossed the sands, stopping just before the lad who warily peered out from under his thatch of black hair.

"I'm sorry," Rhoyd said. "But I felt the magic in the skin, and I knew I had to give it back ... Have I vexed you?"

Conor took a deep breath, chewing his lower lip as he looked out to sea. Horns, he knew there would be times like this. *He's mageborn. He canna help what he is, or what he sees. What he knows 'twill always be beyond the understanding of mortalborn men like myself...*

"Conor?" Rhoyd said quietly, his voice trembling.

Another deep breath quelled the sense of humor trying to erupt. This was not the time. Conor pulled his thoughts together and looked back at that forlorn little face washed white by the moonlight.

"Aye, I'm vexed with ye, lad," Conor said in a calm voice. "And by all rights, I should dust yer treads good and smart for going off like that. You could have been hurt or worse out here in the dark ..."

"I'm sorry," Rhoyd glanced down to hide his tears of shame.

"And ye stole the good crofter's skin besides," Conor added. "Ye know how I feel about thieves ..."

Rhoyd sniffed, and Conor nodded with satisfaction, lowering himself so that teary gaze could not escape him.

"Do you still have that silver you Aunt Genna gave you?" Conor asked. Rhoyd nodded.

"Then you'll be giving a sgillinn to the crofter to pay him back for the loss of his skin," Conor said sternly. "And you should count yourself fortunate that you'll get no more than a warning from me. The next time you go larking about in the dark without telling me why first, I will dust your treads. Do we have an understanding now, lad?"

Rhoyd nodded, throwing arms around Conor's neck and sobbing. "She was so happy," the lad whispered. "And so was the boy."

"Aye, I could see that what you did was an honorable thing," Conor said as he rose. He lifted the lad, holding him close as Conor started for the path. "But I think we'd best keep what happened here to ourselves."

The crofter was hardly likely to believe that the pelt was anything but lost at sea in Conor's mind anyway.

Besides, Conor would never do anything to spoil the precious magic he clutched in his arms.

✱

When not running around in her imaginary worlds recording the deeds of various characters, LAURA J. UNDERWOOD can either be found hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains or playing her harp Glynnis or working at the library where she manages the Periodicals Department. She is a member of SFWA with over three dozen stories to her credit, a recently recruited SFWA Musketeer, and a former state fencing champion.

ALLISON FIONA HERSHEY has been involved professionally in the science fiction and fantasy field for over twelve years. Her work has appeared in books, magazines, and commercial products. After spending 5 years as a computer animator and art director, she recently returned to freelance work and is currently living in Long Beach, California.

THE SECRET

by Stacie Kirk

I'm truly glad that there are only three dragons in my house, and very small ones at that. I'm especially grateful that I've only seen one of them shoot flame, on only one occasion. I give thanks daily for my new house; the full basement is the ideal place for a dragon hutch.

They don't seem to be inclined to mate with each other, which is kind of a shame. I'm sure I could find a ready market for baby dragons. Of course, I'd have to screen the would-be owners carefully to eliminate the sickies who'd only want them for their blood or bones.

It's a moot point. I don't know if they can reproduce, or even what sex they may be. I tend to think of Dexter as male and Sinister as female, while Reggie has me completely baffled.

I suppose if I really wanted more dragons, I could always use *The Secret*. I refuse to do that. It's one thing to create live creatures by accident, but I have a feeling there'd be real trouble if I went around doing it on purpose.

The fabric of reality can only take so

much strain, after all. I don't want to be the one to push the universe back into chaos, just for a get-rich-quick dragon farming scheme.

It all began when I discovered the work of Peregrine Heathclyffe. I was a homely, teenage, walking attitude in need of adjustment, who lived in a world of her own. Drawing and painting let me escape reality and communicate at the same time. I carried my sketchbook everywhere. Most of that early work of mine was a second-rate imitation of Heathclyffe's.

I admit I had a crush on him, at first. But I was really in love with his work. I know I'm giving away my age here, but he was still alive then and the best known, highest paid illustrator in America. It seemed that every novel that boasted his work on the cover became a best-seller, and all six of his picture books won Caldecotts. But you knew that already. But do you know why all his original works were cremated with him?

Until his death in 1987, Peregrine

Heathclyffe was the only known master of the style critics called "Ultra Trompe l'Oeil." His subject matter was nearly always fantastic, yet everything he created was so breathtakingly life-like it gave you goosebumps.

I finally met him in person at a fantasy convention in '81. I made a complete ass of myself, of course, hanging on his every word like the hero-worshipping college freshman I was. Naturally, I eagerly brandished my sketchbook at him and inflicted my phone number on him. I practically begged him to call me some time, which, of course, he didn't.

In the six years that followed, I lived from convention to convention. I *did* manage to get a life, a degree, a job, and a boyfriend. I'd outgrown my crush; even if I'd seen him oftener than once a year (and he was cute!) all the gossip about his personal life cured me pretty completely.

But I never got over my fascination with his work. I sought him out at every con and made a nuisance of my-



self, badgering him to teach me his Secret.

Then one day my office phone rang. "Twyla Underwood," I said briskly, not realizing that this was The Call That Would Change My Life.

"Twyla!" exclaimed an oddly familiar, slightly inebriated baritone. "How'd you like to be the next Peregrine Heathclyffe?"

"What?!" I cried. "Who is this?"

"Me! Him. Heathclyffe."

"Omgod!"

"If I am, I didn't ask to be."

He invited me to come visit him in his rural retreat, to become his apprentice and learn the secret of Ultra Trompe l'Oeil. After he finally convinced me that he really meant it and had no hidden agenda, I leapt at the opportunity — even though it meant giving up my job and half killing myself to reassure my boyfriend.

The house was a surprisingly ordinary split-level rancher, hidden in the heart of about a hundred wooded acres. There were no pictures of any kind on any of the walls. There was an astounding amount of closet space, all taken up with iron containers the size and shape of extra-large pizza boxes.

A state-of-the-art color copier dominated his workroom. I really envied him that particular toy.

I can still see him as he was then, clad in unutterably hideous Bermuda shorts and T-shirt (it said "Been there, Done that"), barefoot, gin and tonic always in hand. His olive complexion was turning fallow, his black eyes hollow. He'd always been lean; now he was gaunt.

"Before you can learn the Secret," he lectured melodramatically, "you must learn the Rules. Write them down and never, never forget them."

Dutifully, I took notes as he went on.

"First, we always grind and mix our own colors, by a process I shall show you when you are ready. Second, we work only during daylight hours, never after sunset. Third, as soon as a painting is dry we make as many copies as we may need and lock the original away in one of these boxes, which are never, I repeat, never, to be left open. Finally, we never, never, never allow moonlight to touch our canvas. Is that clear?"

He made me repeat The Rules several times before he said I was ready to learn The Secret.

When that day finally came, he was, shall we say, feeling no pain.

"You wanna know the Secret, right?" he slurred. "The magic. How I do it. Well, this is it. Here it is. Right here in this bottle."

For a second I thought I'd jeopardized my career and love life just to hear an alcoholic claim his genius was born of booze. Then I realized he wasn't holding a liquor bottle.

It was a blue glass bottle with no label. The clear liquid inside looked and smelled a little like a mixture of glycerine and rose water.

I dipped my finger in and started to taste it, when he stopped me. "You don't *drink* it," he said scornfully. "It goes in the paint. Three drops per color. Then do your painting, make your copies as soon as it dries and put the thing away at once."

He chose a sketch and set me to work, first creating the colors then transforming sketch into painting.

There is a state of mind some people call "flow", being utterly absorbed in doing something you love and losing all track of time. I'd experienced the sensation of flow many times while drawing or painting, but never had I attained it so quickly and completely as I did that day. "Flow" is indeed the perfect word for it. The painting simply flowed into being through me, while I experienced an ineffable ecstasy.

The painting, a simple scene with some rabbits and flowers, was the finest thing I'd ever done. You could almost feel the fluffy fur and velvety petals, virtually smell the fresh grass. As soon as the paint dried, Peregrine snatched it up and ran off twenty-five color copies. The copies were spectacular, seeming to quiver with life. But the original! He promptly locked it away, and I sighed with regret.

I stayed on long enough to build up a sizeable portfolio of work using the



Secret. Peregrine gave me my own iron box to hold the originals, and permitted me to run off dozens of copies of each.

Then, one day, he told me my training was at an end. "It's time for you to seek your fortune," he said grandly. "I want you to take these with you." He then astonished me by giving me the entire bottle of The Secret and the copier!

When I tried to protest, he told me he was retiring and wouldn't need them anymore. I think he knew he hadn't much time left.

I showed my new portfolio around, and promptly landed my first major commission. I was to do the cover art for an anthology of stories about dragons.

Naturally, I went home and called my mother, my boyfriend, and all my friends with the news. It was nearly sunset before I even opened my sketchbook. It was quite dark out when I set up my easel under the track-lit skylight. (I lived and worked in a classic studio loft in those days, before I decided the bohemian stereotype lifestyle was too uncomfortable and expensive to maintain.) I was so excited I simply forgot The Rules, not that I took them all that seriously anyway. I kind of thought the Secret was some kind of creativity-inducing drug, and the Rules were just so much pointless ritual that Peregrine had built up around it.

I painted furiously, a group of three dragons. The central figure was dark purple and peered backward over one scaly shoulder. To the right and left I placed matching green dragons, rearing up on their hind feet.

By the time I finished, it was nearly midnight. I was completely exhausted. I collapsed on the bed and fell hard asleep, leaving the painting to dry on the easel.

I awoke to find a blank canvas on the easel, and George, my cat, in full feline freak out. I joined him in freaking out when I discovered the cause: three miniature, very real dragons were helping themselves to his bowl of Friskies.

Of course I recognized them. How could I not? They were my own creations, after all. Only now they were frolicking at my feet, eating my cat's food, skittering up my drapes, and pooping in the corner of the room. It took me a few days to come to terms with the reality of the situation.

I learned to deal with it. What else could I do? I named them (Reggie is

short for "Regardant"), bought them their own food and water dishes, and laid in an extra bag of Friskies. (As far as I know, they don't make Dragon Chow.) I even retained a veterinarian who specializes in small reptiles, after swearing her to secrecy.

I think the adjustment was harder for poor George. He provoked the one and only burst of flame I've seen from the dragons. It was pure self defense on Reggie's part, and the flame was no greater than what you'd get by striking a match. It singed George's whiskers, though, and since then he leaves the dragons scrupulously alone.

After the dragons came into ... my life (I was going to say, came into the picture, but they did the opposite, didn't they?) I became fanatical about keeping The Rules. I think of it as a kind of metaphysical contraception. I didn't want a bunch of tiny trolls, hobbits, or unicorns running around my apartment.

I've made some effort to learn exactly what the Secret is and how Peregrine came by it, but I've had no success.

I sent a few drops to a chemistry lab for analysis, and created no end of excitement among the chemists. They said it was unlike any known substance. Even their computer failed to identify it.

They asked so many searching questions that I became paranoid and told them there wasn't any more. Every now and then, I still get calls from young chemistry majors hoping to get the credit for discovering a new element. I know they'd love to experiment with it, but I just can't permit it. I suspect the substance could prove volatile in some highly unexpected ways. Heck, it already has!

My best guess is that The Secret is a variant of the fabled Elixir of Life. Apparently, it takes moonlight to activate it fully.

I've done the best I could to control the power I've been given. I personally saw to it that Peregrine Heathclyffe's last wishes were carried out to the letter, in spite of howls of protest from the art world. Trust me, some of his subjects were not critters you'd want to have leaping off the walls of your friendly neighborhood gallery!

For the most part, I've tried to use The Secret strictly in accordance with the Rules, and took care not to take on more work than I could handle. As far

as I'm concerned, using it to build a successful career is an acceptable risk. Anything beyond that is a door I'm pretty sure I don't want to open.

I know, I know, I should never have agreed to do that romance cover. It was against my better judgement, even at the time. They had a killer deadline on the project, and I doubted I could make it and still keep the Rules. But the money they waved in front of me was too good to pass up.

I was going to do some ordinary work, just leave out The Secret altogether. I tried to do that. But somehow I couldn't seem to get anything to come out right. I made one stupid mistake after another, and there was that deadline, breathing down my neck. The whole project became a huge chore, and I was tempted to risk my future career by telling them to get somebody else. But I'd already put the advance down on my new house.

So I weakened. I whipped out The Secret, figuring I still had plenty of daylight left.

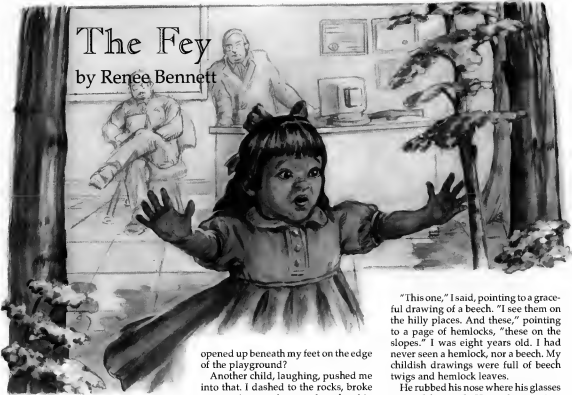
I admit, I have often wondered whether creatures painted to life with The Secret can reproduce by themselves. I have a feeling I will soon find out. Willful, copper-tressed Angelique and brooding, sardonic Alastair can't seem to keep their hands off each other. ✱

STACIE KIRK writes: "I am the enchanted vassal of The Little People, namely the Sidhe knight Sir Timothy GoldenSword (age 4) and the Princess Laila-Rose (age 2). My boon companions are Philip the Phlegmatic (Defender of the Dmesne and Founder of the Feasts), Wolfgar the Wizard (my firstborn, age 17), and the warrior woman Roxanne the Ruthless (age 14). We dwell more or less harmoniously in the heart of a forest of oak and pine, along with Kewl the Wonder Dog and assorted cats. I was born in the Year of the Tiger (1962). I determined that 1998 — also the Year of the Tiger — would be the year I made my first major sale. To this end, I bought "Success Bath Salts" from an occult shop in the city, and took a "success bath" every night for a week before I submitted this story. Never underestimate the value of superstition!"

ALAN GUTIERREZ lives in Sedona, AZ, with his family, where he enjoys producing fantasy and western art. His illustrations frequently grace the pages of Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine.

The Fey

by Renee Bennett



As a child, clumsy was a curse I feared, as I feared the shadows I saw in bricks and railings, leaves swaying like ghosts all around me. Vines that clutched, twigs that stabbed, the thick boles of trees that blocked my way and hid the sane world from my desperate searching.

My mother thought me mad, banned all television to me, then spent long years consulting doctors and psychiatrists. I spent those years describing trees, drawing chalk lines on floors where the trunks thrust up, describing new buds in spring, stark branches in winter. Listened, as learned men and women spoke of my delusions, of that wood that was there for me, in rooms where I was treated as if I were not there for them.

School was not a possibility, of course. How could I attend a school, where ghostly brambles infested doorways, where a fresh-running stream coursed across a hallway without a ford to cross it, where a deep green chasm

opened up beneath my feet on the edge of the playground?

Another child, laughing, pushed me into that. I dashed to the rocks, broke my arm in two places and my head in one, and left teachers wondering how so many bruises came to me in a fall from my feet to my face.

But I remember falling farther than that.

Tutors after that, who thought me odd. One, who thought me whimsical, gave me pencils and papers and asked me to draw what I saw.

Leaves and twigs and the trunks of trees, marching into phantom distances.

"Where are the spiders?" he said, touching one drawing, then another. "Where are the birds?"

I looked at my work, pencil still. "I don't see spiders or birds," I said, and lay my hand flat on the face of the page. "I don't see animals or people. I see flowers sometimes," and I looked up into his face.

He blinked at me several times from behind his glasses.

"Trees," he said.

He brought a book of Audubon to the next session, a book full of watercolor plates of trees and shrubs. I had never heard of Audubon. I was enchanted.

"This one," I said, pointing to a graceful drawing of a beech. "I see them on the hilly places. And these," pointing to a page of hemlocks, "these on the slopes." I was eight years old. I had never seen a hemlock, nor a beech. My childish drawings were full of beech twigs and hemlock leaves.

He rubbed his nose where his glasses sat, and frowned. He made notes in a little book about it, which I did not mind, not so much as I minded the doctors. My tutor had given me what the doctors had not — names. A sense of belonging to my world of trees. I could forgive him his notes for that.

Thus I discovered botany, and painting. Years passed within the pages of books, eight to eighteen to twenty-eight, a lifetime between where I lived with people and where I lived with trees. Trees that sometimes were shadows in silence, sometimes so solid I bruised myself on roots or scratched myself on brambles. The world passed around me, great and small events, the deaths of parents and pets, the fighting and winning of wars and governments. I paid little attention, because of trees.

There was a border, an arm of sea that guarded my island home from the mainland. Navies fought back and forth and back again to possess the waterway until, finally, the mainlanders won it. I knew this dimly, heard in scattered reports between the whispers of leaves

and the tap of twig on twig. Grown, I had inherited my mother's house, had found a comfortable living for myself with paintbrushes and canvas and images of forest. In wartime my paintings sold remarkably well. Glimpses of serenity.

And then the mainlanders landed, and our unready army shattered under the new advance. I looked up and out my window, between a maple seedling and the knuckled root of its mother, and found black uniforms marching past in the street.

A knock on the door. I got up, pushed the panel open, faced an officer with red piping on his trousers and dogwood blooms shining pale around his face. He spoke stiffly, his mouth wooden around the consonants and vowels of my language.

"This town is now a garrison," he said, taking his hat off to me and holding it in front of him like some diminutive shield. "You will have guests, soldiers, living with you. I must see your premises, we will determine how many you will service."

I disliked his choice of words, but then, he was not here by choice. I let him in, and the two soldiers who followed, who stared at me and made lewd gestures behind the officer's back after the introductions. I stared at them until the shape of the dogwood became clear behind them, and they fell to muttering between themselves.

I had three bedrooms upstairs, all unused. I myself slept in the little den off the parlor, which was my studio. The officer looked like he could not decide if I were mad or merely odd, and told the two with him to choose rooms.

"I would rather have you, sir officer," I said, watching the taller of the two soldiers toss his bag onto my mother's

bed. "These two have few manners around women."

The officer turned red, and muttered something about finding another soldier for the other room. He escaped my presence with that, while the two soldiers snickered behind his back.

I went down the stairs to the kitchen. The taller of the two soldiers followed me, while the other tried the taps in the bathroom upstairs. I pulled vegetables out of the icebox with the sound of running water above my head.

"I am Luth. Corporal Luth," said the man in my kitchen. He sauntered over and leaned over me as I took a peeler to a carrot. "You will like me. Won't you?"

He was trying to frighten me. He knew nothing about trees. "You are a poor fortune-teller," I told him, and picked up the big knife. He looked at that and sauntered back over to the door. I chopped the carrot, got the biggest pot out and put the pieces in.

"We are winning," he said, sounding sulky. I picked an onion out of my pile of vegetables and cut it into eighths. He shifted against the door. I lifted the onion pieces into the pot, then chose a

potato. He shifted again. "You don't believe me."

"Belief is over-rated," I said, and discarded the potato. It had a black hollow in it.

A third soldier arrived, a woman, yellow-haired and bluff. I disliked her at first sight, a rare thing for me. She stood out solid among my trees, an even rarer thing. I served her vegetable soup, frowning, trying to remember the last time that had happened.

"I don't bite, Mistress Morgana," she said, and grinned as I startled out of thought.

"Too bad," Luth said, and grinned at her glare.

She and I stared at him, until he fell to muttering into his soup bowl. The



Artwork by Heather Hudson

other man slurped, and pronounced me a good cook.

"I am Jan Jannivar," said the yellow-haired soldier. She followed me to the sink after supper, watched me run water and soap over the dishes there. I looked at her and saw oak leaves shadowing her hair. The oaks are dignified trees — they come to my sight only for special occasions.

"Jannivar," I said, rolling the syllables in my mouth. Then, "Gwenivere."

She caught her breath. Then something thumped and crashed upstairs. Gwen looked up and swore. "I'll deal with them," she said, and ran. I finished the dishes and opened the back door onto my garden, let the night into my kitchen. Ghost leaves flittered around my feet, driven by a ghost breeze. Ghost oaks.

"Gwenivere," I said into the black beyond the door, and a white moth fluttered drunkenly across the light. Its wings were translucent — it belonged to the trees.

I have no sons. Perhaps the old tragedy won't play this time.

Gwenivere. It was too much to ask; fate has no mercy.

I got my shawl and headed for the street. Luth met me at the door. "Where do you think you're going? There's a curfew."

I stared at him, recognizing him now that Gwenivere had stirred up the old memories, other lives, other times. "You've never been able to hold me, Lot, even when you should." There was a broken pine behind him; I flicked a corner of my shawl into his eyes and stepped around it when he blinked.

Brambles scratched my hands. The soft earth of the forest road took me through the door while Lot shouted in confusion. I had not done all of my exploring of trees between the pages of

books in the decades after my broken arm.

Tragedy. I am a painter now, and happy in it. I refuse to be part of ancient feuds, ancient curses, ancient wars that repeat themselves endlessly, uselessly through lifetimes. If I must, I will strangle Arthur with my bare hands to stay out of it this time. I went looking for my brother.

The streets were full of fair-haired soldiers, black uniforms marching together, the red stripes on the trousers flickering in the dark like pale flames. Tall, men and women both, their voices raised sometimes in orders and sometimes in question. They paid me no heed, small dark-haired, dark-eyed woman that I am, as they paid no heed to the trees I sheltered under.

At a corner, a man in grey pants and a green sweater knelt on the pavement, his hands clasped behind his neck. A neighbor; he had bought painted lilies from me, for his wife. His face was bleak. The men around him conferred in low tones in their own language, sounding angry, perhaps frustrated.

I stayed among my trees. Whatever they had caught him at, I could not help him now.

"You there! Who are you, and where are you going?"

Someone else caught. There was a lightening over the roofs of the houses, toward the town square; I headed in that direction. Then a man's hand fell on my wrist and he pulled me around, out of the trees. He shook me and I blinked upward ... into Lancelot du Lac's blue eyes.

He shook me again. "I said, who are you, and where are you going?"

He's at least half Fey himself — where else would he have got his black hair? Or that power coursing through him, that can see through trees, to snatch me out from among them? But he is blind

to his deeper self, and for all his usually pretty manners, I sometimes wonder who Lancelot du Lac's real mother was, and why he never speaks of her.

His manners were not pretty now. His grip tightened on my wrist and he shouted something over his shoulder to one of the men around my neighbor. The man nodded and pulled something steel-glittery out of a belt pouch. Lancelot reached for the handcuffs.

I should have strangled Gwenivere. Stabbed her in her sleep, poisoned her soup — and Lot's too, while I was at it. That would have broken the curse of us past mending. That would have stopped her meeting Arthur, and Lancelot, and the whole bloody mess blowing up again, to exaltation and ruin.

Inevitable, now. And all my fault. As a child, clumsy was a curse I feared, tripping over roots that no one else saw. As an adult, clumsy is a curse I fear, tripping over feelings more complex to map than any forest, real or ghost.

Well. Perhaps the time is past for fear.

I lifted my chin as he put the first cuff on. "Take me to Arthur," I said, and watched the blue eyes narrow in puzzlement.

There is still a way. "Tell him ... Merlin is come."

✱

RENEE BENNETT lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Despite the name and residence, she is neither French nor Canadian. She is a member of the local speculative fiction writer's group, IFWA, and it pleases her to be known as an Ifwit, even among strangers. She prefers to write science fiction but sometimes a lack of sleep and a surfeit of chocolate conspire against that.

HEATHER HUDSON lives in Seattle. Her e-mail address is hudillo@earthlink.net.



THE MAENADS

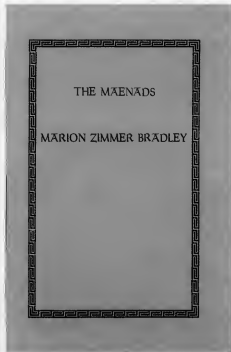
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Mistaken Identity

By Charles Richard Laing

"Nice sword you've got there, sonny," the old woman remarked.

"Admire it, witch," the warrior snarled. "The last thing you will see on this plane of existence will be my blade screaming toward your foul head!"

"Screaming toward my foul head!" the old woman echoed. "Is it an enchanted sword, then? One that screams as you swing it? That's fascinating. I've never heard of a screaming sword. Now, a singing sword, that's a different story. Everyone's heard stories about singing swords. But a screaming sword. Now I think I've seen everything. I can't wait to tell the girls."

"The sword doesn't actually scream, you silly crone. That was just a figure of speech."

The old woman shook her head. "How foolish of me. Of course it doesn't scream...."

"Enough idle chatter, witch. Are you ready to die?" the warrior queried.

"No, I'm not," the old woman admitted. "Is anyone? But I believe that's beside the point. I think you've made some kind of mistake. You see, I'm not a witch."

"Oh, no?" The warrior frowned. "I have it on good authority that you are using your magical powers to ter-

rorize the King's men."

"Only his tax collectors," the old woman clarified.

"Twenty of his finest men have called upon you. None have returned," he said.

"Was it twenty? I lost count after the first eleven or twelve." The old woman smiled.

"You admit your evil deeds, and yet you claim to be innocent of the charge of witchcraft? Your own words condemn you, woman. Enough talk."

He raised his sword to strike the killing blow. The old woman sighed and raised a gnarled finger in his direction. She mumbled three words, and the warrior crumbled to dust. Only the sword remained.

"Silly boy," the old woman said. "A witch would have turned you into a frog. I'm a sorceress."

✽

CHARLES RICHARD LAING is a very short man who writes very short stories.

OMAR RAYYAN began drawing at the age of two. Magazines, children's books, and gaming cards have been keeping Omar busy and winning him the occasional award. He's currently working on a children's book from his tiny cottage in the woods of West Tisbury, with his one wife, two cats, 12 fish, and a pretentious budgie.





Mary C. Aldridge, Cambridge, MA

Dear Folks,

Just wanted to say a word of appreciation for all your work over the years. My experiences of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine* were always pleasant and professional. Marion must have been very proud of her team. Best wishes for all your new endeavors!

Thank you, Mary; yes, we have tried to make her proud of us. Your letter was greatly appreciated. —reh



Jeff Baker, Wichita KS

Dear Folks:

About four years ago when I started writing fiction again, after an absence of about ten years, one of my goals was to place a story in Mrs. Bradley's magazine. While I didn't send off anything in time, I read and learned from her advice to writer's column (in particular it cured me of trying to write a "Cover Story" right off the bat, which was what I started off doing).

I am today a better writer than I was before, and have recently placed two stories in a small-press anthology. Someday, if you see my name in a byline, you will know that part of the credit goes to a great magazine and a great lady.

Oh yes: Mrs. Bradley's legacy of teaching and encouraging new writers will go on. One of our local libraries has a near-complete set of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*.



Dan Robinson, from the Internet

At one of the lowest times in my life, I was 21 years old, working in the carnival business, barely able to feed myself, I was at a laundry washing what little clothes I had when I passed by a bookstore that was throwing away books that had the covers torn off. I picked up 2 of them (it was all I had room for). One was **DARKOVER LANDFALL**. I was captured from the very first page. I had to have more. Every town we would travel to I would save my money and find used book stores to buy anything about Darkover.

These stories carried me through the roughest times of my life. I have a complete collection including some hardbacks of other of her stories. Darkover is still my favorite place to visit. I have introduced this world to others so that they may have the world changed as mine did. Those stories taught me that honor and truth are not just words but ways of life.

Now 22 years later when I finally have the courage to tell Marion Thank You ... she is gone. I would like her family to know that now I am a successful business owner in Kentucky and I honestly believe that she is partly responsible for that. She has made a difference in my life, my family's life and in many of my friends' lives. She has touched many of us and I would thank her from the bottom of my heart. Instead I say a thank you in my prayers ... I know she must be smiling down on us ...

Thank You, Marion ... till hopefully we meet ...

Darkover was Marion's favorite place to visit, too. And if you get a chance to attend the Darkover Grand Council meeting near Baltimore after Thanksgiving, that's the next best thing. —reh



Janice Herr, Las Vegas, NV

Dear Ms. Holmen:

Thank you for your personal comments on the story I submitted. The magazine has been a great help to me and I am just sorry it took me so long to discover it.

I am in the same generation as Marion, just a few years behind her in age, and I was amazed at the legacy she left in her writing. Too late I realize how wrong it was to put my writing last while I took care of everyone else except myself. There was always family, church, school and other activities that came first. I couldn't say "no" to anyone, thinking I probably wasn't that good anyway and it didn't matter if I put off writing until I had time.

It has been encouragement in the magazine from Marion and you that has prompted people like me to start writing and stop putting it off. Some people can write material that gets published the first time, but most people need to spend years on practice. Isaac Asimov said that some people will never be able to write well enough. I may fit in that category, but if so, writing is a very pleasant hobby.

The magazine has been fun to read and I could never pick a "best" story. The one I was currently reading was the best one. Thank you for the work you put into the magazine to make it such an excellent publication.

Marion and I shared many attitudes, among them the idea that people should be encouraged to write clearly. So I hope you won't put off any longer your attempts to tell your own stories. —reh



Mark Budman, from the Internet

Dear Ms. Holmen,

Ordinarily I don't attempt to discuss my rejected stories with the editors, but since you asked a question about my "Long Shadow of Magic" ... I named my butler Pravda (Truth) for the same reason I named the younger sister Lebed (Swan) and the older sister Vesna (Spring). These are old Slavic names. They always had clear meaning. The same goes for kn'yaz (prince) Vladimir (the ruler of the world). Today, one can tell right away the few remaining Slavic names (like my wife's Svetlana [light]).

Now, let me ask you a question. I realize the probability of your reply is negligible, but I would kick myself forever if I didn't try. You wrote: "this story fails to make its point." To me, it means that you didn't understand it, but since you can't be wrong, the fault is mine. The burden of proof is with the writer, right? I will not take you time to explain the plot (though I thought it has a more interesting setting than your traditional Western European stories). But what's wrong with a bit of mystery, when the reader will draw her own conclusions and add a missing piece of a puzzle on his own? Isn't this called reader's participation? In my stories that have been accepted by literary magazines such as *Mississippi Review* or *Midstream*, I did just that — invited the reader to work with me. Thank you for your attention.

Dear Mr. Budman,

Probably since I studied Russian in high school, I found the use of names such as "truth" distracting; I wasn't sure if their meaning were intended to add a dimension to the plot, or if they were simply chosen as typical Slavic names. Details in short stories are usually significant, or they should be.

Magazines and editors vary in their tolerance (or requirement) for uncertainty, but Marion and I tended to prefer stories with clear plots and satisfying endings. Often we rejected stories where the ending simply didn't seem strong enough to suit our readers. Take a look at Ann Sharp's column on foreshadowing (overleaf), since it bears on this same general topic.

— Rachel Holmen



Annette Hall, Lakewood, WA

Some comments on the stories in issue 45:

I liked "Just Rule". The dialog was particularly effective in drawing a clear distinction between the witches and the savages and also in making Tilda a sympathetic character. The world Ms. Robinson portrayed drew me in and tugged at my imagination....In "The Janitor's Closet", I especially enjoyed the portrayal of Ms. Hardy, and the concept of enchanted office equipment was certainly fun to explore. Using Mr. Gobbels' testimony against him was a delightful detail.... "A Dear Gazelle"...must have cost much effort in research. It was a good exploration of character....I liked the portrayal of Garrin in "Valemist Tower", from his cold, his resentment and withdrawal (and his deftly implied guilt over his stepfather's death) to his brandy sharing at the end. Ms. McConchie put some interesting twists on the changeling myth in "Faer Trading". I always did think it likely that the faerie were unfairly maligned on this subject.

Omar Rayyan's utterly gorgeous illustrations definitely added luster to "A Dear Gazelle". The first illustration by Lynne Fahnstalk for "The Janitor's Closet", the one with the vacuum cleaner with the cord thrown around Mr. Gobbels' throat, really took the cake. It was humorous and well-balanced, with lots of juicy detail (the untied shoelace, the ribs in the socks, the plunger, the cigar) which tended to add to the character. Mr. Jainschigg produced a fine and imaginative rendering of a troll for "Just Rule". I like woodcuts (or drawings that look like them) in any case, but I think he did particularly well here in getting across the elemental images that Ms. Robinson used in the text. As for "Cauliflower", this was a tough subject. I did not provide any outstanding imagery on which she could build. I particularly like the humorous details she added: the carrot necklace and the frog-pattern armbands. Ms. Davis has a wonderful imagination which I was very happy to see applied to my story (Thanks!). K.L. Darnell's first illustration for "Valemist Tower" was the one that caught me. It seemed to capture some of Garrin's character at the start of the tale: endurance, self pity, wariness.

Thank you for your detailed comments, Annette. —reh



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Foreshadowing

In one of the final scenes of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Dark-
over novel **THE BLOODY SUN**, Elorie casts a glamour over
Jeff, enabling him to run errands sight unseen as long as the
glamour lasts.

I got to thinking about this last week when my mother
complained about a book ending that seemed to come out of
nowhere. "Aha," I pontificated, "the author didn't fore-
shadow properly!"

Let us take our familiar skeleton of a good story, where
a **SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER**
overcomes **ALMOST-IMPOSSIBLE ODDS**
by **HIS OR HER OWN EFFORTS**
to achieve a **WORTHWHILE GOAL**.

You can use foreshadowing to enhance all four of these
conditions — to make the character more lovable, to lay the
groundwork for the character to overcome the almost-im-
possible odds, to escalate the effort needed, and even to
broaden the worthwhile goal. Doing an outstanding job —
when the reader re-reads the book for the third time just to
pick them up — is comparable to casting an effective glam-
our.

I'd say there are two kinds of foreshadowing, but they're
both done by slipping in a clue that the reader picks up —
preferably subconsciously.

The first kind is the sort you'd use if you were writing a
romance and Bruce and Susanne are expected to be engaged,
married, or at least committed to each other on the last page
— you need to drop a few clues to the reader that they are
falling in love with each other, even while the suspense —
the misunderstanding or quarrel or opposition or threat — is
keeping them apart. Maybe you want the reader to know
more than Bruce and Susanne do, especially in the early
stages! so your foreshadowing tells the reader that they're
interested in each other even if one or the other or both don't
realize it themselves. The classic example of this kind is
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, where the reader watches Eliza-
beth slowly falling in love with Darcy even though Eliza-
beth has written him off as a self-important snob and rather
fancies herself in love with Wickham. Clues of this kind can
range from the offensively obvious sort in some contempo-
rary romances, where the author assesses the hero's phy-
sique as if he were an animal, to the sort where, say, Bruce
tries to work out why he likes Susanne so much when he
usually prefers women like Krystle, completely different in
looks and style. A clue that reveals to the reader something
the character doesn't yet suspect is likely to keep the reader
turning pages, anticipating what will happen next.

The object of the second kind of foreshadow is to make the
conclusion come as a surprise — but a logical surprise. This
one is the more usual, less obvious kind of foreshadowing
clue, of the sort you'd need to use in a mystery plot. On the
one hand, you want the glamour to prevent the reader from
detecting the solution until you're good and ready — prefer-

ably the last possible moment when Simon Legree is un-
masked — on the other hand, when you do whip away the
mask, the reader should say "So that was it!" not "Huh?" In
the first type of clue, the reader may know more than your
characters; in the second type, the characters — your sleuth,
say — should (hopefully) have interpreted the clues, solved
the case, and know more than your readers do.

The tricky part is slipping in those foreshadowing clues.
It's important to have them, or your story will appear either
boringly predictable or puzzlingly disjointed. If done really
well, good foreshadowing contributes greatly to willing
suspension of disbelief and can make a mystery genuinely
mysterious, a romance novel suspenseful, a plot as asinine as
a Gothic novel seem logical and reasonable — and practi-
cally any plot credible.

In a short story, any mention of something should be a
foreshadowing — as Chekov said, "If there is a gun on the
wall, it should go off." This is because of the short length —
you have no room, in a short story, to meander on about
anything that isn't essential.

To work out your foreshadowing clues: First, you have to
know where the story is going. Will Bruce and Susanne fall
in love? Will the murderer be discovered? Will Kevin suc-
ceed in his revenge, or will his plan backfire? Is the mysteri-
ous object really providing supernatural help? Will Larry
make the difficult decision that will lead to peace of mind?
Will Dina's father escape his predicament? In fact, Will Joe
get his fanny out of the bear trap?

Then you have to work out what the clues should be. If
Bruce and Susanne are falling in love, what are the symp-
toms? Is Bruce sighing and Susanne languishing? Does Bruce
suddenly, clearly laboring under considerable stress, start
telling her — and all the readers — everything about his
financial position? Mary Renault said in **THE PERSIAN**
BOY, "In his presence I felt more beautiful, a sign one can't
mistake." The clues you use for romance will be consid-
erably different from the ones you'd need if your characters
were solving a murder, where the significant clues should be
lost in a welter of distraction and misdirection. If Stephen
will inherit a "completely unexpected" fortune in the last
chapter, you need to mention the ailing, rich, childless rela-
tive much earlier, either as a hypochondriac, so the reader
doesn't particularly expect him to die; or mention the asset
as something that doesn't seem particularly valuable, like a
building that's a tax burden to your character but something
he/she can't sell for some reason. If you're writing a super-
natural story, you'll need to work out the clues that make the
supernatural explanation acceptable, or the ones that ratio-
nally explain all those mysterious manifestations.

What you want to do is, first: mix up your clues. Though
the foreshadow has to precede the event, the reader is less
likely to anticipate your plot if your foreshadowing clues are
NOT in logical order. Moreover, if you have carefully brought

in (what will eventually be) the solution as part of a problem the character can hardly cope with, the reader probably won't out-think you.

Second, slip your clues in spots where they will fit plausibly and appear natural, and don't emphasize them. Sentences and paragraphs containing foreshadowing should read especially smoothly and carry the reader right past the clue to the next piece of action. The rich relative above should appear in some other way in the story — some way that has nothing to do with his fortune, but everything to do with earlier plot development. If your sleuth is examining the corpse, you can slip in whichever clue is important to your solution . . . along with seventeen others, some of which should be dramatic enough to distract the reader.

Third, some foreshadowing clues are things you, the writer, tell — but the very best are the ones you *show*. If a cat is essential to your plot, and Simon Legree has ailurophobia, you should confront Simon Legree with a cat (or the other way around, depending on your plot) very early. You needn't emphasize this aspect of the drama in the early scene — in fact, you certainly shouldn't; you should be keeping Simon Legree's nefarious schemes moving right along — but what you *show* in the early scene should make the essential scene believable and logical.

Last, you should have some second person read your finished product, since what you originally thought of as extremely subtle foreshadowing will, by the fifth revision, stand out in boldface to your eyes. Your reader may tell you that the same clues you thought must be giving away the ending are TOO subtle to pick up, or that she identified the murderer in Chapter Two. At this point you will realize that foreshadowing is nearly as taxing as casting a psychic glamour — you will undoubtedly wish for a matrix to assist you!

Do your foreshadowing effectively, though, and it will add glamour and possibly legerdemain to your creation. ❄



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"A guide! Young mistress, a guide! At your service, here, here, mistress!"

It was a ragged, half-dead wretch that had accosted her from the rain-slicked alleyway, one Sheylan didn't think would last much longer. Nevertheless, she watched the stinking heap with a wary eye; while she was new to Attantha, she was hardly unfamiliar with professional beggars and the like, and had no great wish to be stabbed in the back. Hefting the battered black case of her eight-string haulti, she offered a thin-lipped smile as cold as the oozing cobbles.

"Thank you, but I don't need one."

The rag-infested mendicant shuddered, thin bones pricking with ice; Sheylan was well aware the effects her unguarded voice had on others, and

was surprised when the man raised a hand as if to touch her, persistent. "Wait! A guard, young mistress, surely you could use a guard. I know where the dangers are, I do."

Again she smiled. "I have Jarax for that, thanks."

On cue, Jarax slipped from the shadows, a darker patch of midnight with lambent, bloody eyes. The beggar's yellow-and-mud eyes opened comically, and his sore-puckered mouth sagged. "Murderess," he whispered, and Sheylan began to frown. "Murderess! Sorcerous leech! You know what they did to Kythanion! You know! They'll do it to you! You'll burn and bleed! Murder—"

Sheylan never saw Jarax's leap or the bite that severed the dying man's head

from his diseased body, but she did hear the disgusted growl as the courser rubbed his muzzle with a hook-clawed hand-paw. "What do these things do?" came the heard-sensed bass rumble. "Roll in it?"

"Can't all be Gifted," Sheylan offered, turning away from the body. The courser snorted and backed away from his kill, five hundred pounds of near-invisible death; if Jarax blinked, he seemed to waver in and out of this world. Even Sheylan had never seen more of Jarax than a partial silhouette and wicked white teeth in the shadows. Still, despite her pseudo-familiar's comforting presence, Sheylan was worried. What had that fool meant about Kythanion? Kythanion was the Bloodfather of the coursers, and had

RAVENOUS

by Ladonna King

been known to form debt-links like hers to Jarax before Maybe this was not a good town for the Gifted. Then again, she was here already; might as well make the best of it.

"Look, I'm going to find a tavern or something, get some quick work and a meal. Think you can fend for yourself for a while?" she asked.

"Probably better than you." Jarax grinned, his teeth defining his face. "We coursers don't fast or purify, after all."

"Well, it does help," Sheylan defended, mock-righteously; they had been arguing this point for years.

"All in the mind, young mistress," Jax teased, and slid into darkness. Sheylan shook her head and headed for the bright lights, places where her music could ensnare a meal, a bed, and some quick coin. She'd just have to be careful how she went about it; if they were hunting the Gifted and debt-bonded, like her, Attantha could become a very dangerous place indeed.

In the backlit glow of the main fireplace, Sheylan's short blonde curls borrowed a snowy halo, one she'd be the first to refute. *Three Sisters* had had a very respectable house minstrel, to her jaundiced ear, and once upon a time, she would have enjoyed listening to him. Tonight, survival overrode professional courtesy; standing in the shadows near the bar, a quickly-muttered cantrip seized the poor fellow with a racking cough and a sudden, embarrassing need to rush to the necessary. Under the guise of commiserating with the proprietor, she allowed her haili case to speak for itself.

Eventually, she was persuaded to play.

By now, the crowd had virtually forgotten the minstrel, upon whom the effects of her hasty spell should be wearing off. Since she hadn't mentioned her name, they'd started crying, "Black! Black!" The color of death and Sheylan's clothes, and of the debt-bonded as well. Gods, she really should have changed. A small nudge of power here and there, and she could have been wearing Temple white; the fact of the matter was, the black looked better on her. Vanity was one of the few possessions she'd managed to retain on the road, and thus she was inclined to keep it.

Sheylan grinned as she caroled the words to a popular country tune, the tavern shaking from floor to rafters as

the patrons stomped their feet in time. She loved crowds. She just had to control her voice a little while longer — and her eyes as well. Ever since her Gifts had shown up, both had the tendency to change, and those alterations were not often mundane by any stretch of the imagination. For now, her voice was still human, and if her eyes were still green, blue, or brown, then she had a good chance at finishing this night in style.

"Thank you to the people of Attantha and *Three Sisters*," she said, bowing when she was nearly ready to pack it in. People were going to want to head home or upstairs to bed soon, and she didn't want to lose her audience before she'd snared a place to sleep. "And in honor of the tavern, three more songs before your humble servant calls it a night. What will it be, my friends? A tale of glory? Something to make you laugh? Or, perhaps, a song of love?"

She'd already begun to lightly caress the strings of her haili, weaving the mildest of enchantments into her voice and music. "Love!" some woman called out from the back of the room, and Sheylan caught sight of a plump farmer's wife, her brown eyes glowing, caught by Sheylan's suggestive notes. Smiling, Sheylan obliged.

Almost anyone who'd taken the time to learn the difficult haili could make it perform what seemed like wonders; in Sheylan's hands, the instrument was magic itself. Her pure, strong voice sighed above the croon of the haili, bewitching, enticing, gathering them all into the arms of her music. Between the first verse and chorus, there was not a listener there that was not hers.

There was brass, silver, and even gold in the tactfully-open case by her feet, and an earnestly shy young man with 'room to spare. 'Two out of three wasn't bad, but she was going to eat this hand-



Artwork by Julia Lacquement

some boy's home chair by chair if she didn't run down something to eat soon. Jarax was right: courser's *did* have it easier. A partly-sensed chuckle in the back of her mind let her know she was still being looked after, and she relaxed a hair more. Every mage needed a courser; they made living so much more reliable.

"I heard some interesting rumors on my way into town," she remarked the next afternoon. "Has Attantha had some excitement lately?"

Keyssler shrugged and frowned; not the best response. Sheylan waited patiently; he'd been a wonderful host, and despite his puppyish shyness, the young man had a good head on his shoulders. "I guess you mean all the lynchings," he replied, and Sheylan's heart sank. Of course. She'd known it had to be bad.

"It's all those mages," he continued. "They weren't bad at all for the longest time, until the next thing we know, Attantha's a nesting ground for Ringraven. Some mage and his familiar brought it on, messing with what they shouldn't have... it's been getting strange out West these days too, I've heard. We should just kill them all and have done with it."

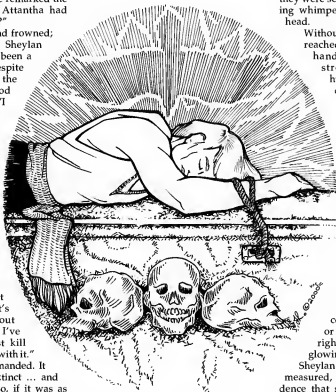
"Ringraven?" she demanded. It was supposed to be extinct ... and perhaps it was better so, if it was as ravenous as its name insisted. But oh, to be younger and less open to temptation! Just a taste of it was all she asked ...

"Yes, hordes of it. Can't go out after dark on some nights. You can feel when. Or hear it."

If it was still larval, maybe she could take it She had to at least try. But if it was older, if there'd been many Gifted in Attantha that it'd killed, and it'd mutated into the next stage — gods, it could be conducting rituals to itself and feeding on souls. Especially of the Gifted. Fine way to live if you're Ringraven, but awfully inconvenient for the mage wanting to drain you. It all depended on the luck of the draw.

"Well, what about Kythanion?" she asked. When Keyssler gave her a strange look, she merely shrugged. "You don't get to hear much news on the road."

He shook back his blond hair and fixed guileless puppy eyes on her, and replied, "They executed that thing and its mage in the capitol weeks ago. The crowd helped."



Sheylan stayed away from Three Sisters that night, just in case someone got the idea that her music was just a little too good, her voice just a little too resonant. It was a strain to maintain the mask of normalcy anyway, and she wanted to be fully rested if she were going to confront Ringraven that night. Waiting for night to fall, she roamed the marketplace, briefly considering buying her hail a better home; eventually, she decided against it, preferring the true wandering minstrel look. It probably earned her more that way, rather than looking like some noble's fat house

musician who didn't need a handout.

As soon as most of the lights and people were left behind, Jarax appeared suddenly beside her, signaling that the coast was clear. Though the courser looked well-fed and smug, Sheylan could tell her companion was troubled. She could easily imagine why. "You heard what he said about Kythanion?" she asked, well aware that Jarax made a habit of listening with her any time they were separated. Jarax gave a grieving whimper and hung his massive head.

Without thinking twice, Sheylan reached out one long-fingered hand as they walked, and stroked the creature's humped, misshapen shoulders to try to comfort him.

Steel muscles bunched and slid unseen under furred-scaled skin, and though Sheylan's eyes insisted there was nothing but darkness there, she could feel the warmth he radiated.

"Well," she asked uncomfortably after a few moments of silence between them, "what do you think we should do about the Ringraven? Find it or leave town in a hurry?" She'd already decided what she wanted, but Jarax could better judge whether or not she was making the right decision. The courser's glowing eyes turned to her, and Sheylan felt as if she were being measured, but she had great confidence that she would not be found wanting.

"Oh, find it," Jarax replied offhandedly, as if nothing in the world could be wrong. "If we don't, it's liable to find us instead. Just watch out for torch-carrying villagers, hmm?" Sheylan laughed: Jarax had a point.

The streets were mostly dark and empty, and Jarax faded into the night whenever they crossed paths with some nervous Attanthan. It felt like a night for Ringraven, all right; Sheylan thought she knew — and maybe heard, though warring cats were not impossible — why the taverns and inns were so full tonight, the streets so deserted.

Abruptly, it came, a floodtide of a

distressed mind so strong it seemed to carry her up and along with it on its crest, a walling grey wave of despair and fear. Definitely not Ringraven, and definitely not something she could ignore. Whoever it was, they were Gifted and in trouble, and that could only spell the very thing she was looking for.

"Jax," she whispered.

"I hear it," was the swift, calm reply. "It's coming from a few blocks to your right, in a cellar somewhere." Sheylan nodded; she could tell that much, but not whether Ringraven was there in force, or what stage it was in. If it was a full-scale war she was walking into, she'd rather like to know about it beforehand. Then again, to drain Ringraven, she'd walk backwards into hell, blindfolded; the stories told about the thing's sheer power were more than enough to justify the risk. Jax faded off to pinpoint the exact location of the nest, leaving Sheylan alone in the dark.

Jarax appeared beside her again in a few moments, and confusion was apparent in his voice. "I can't sense the damned stuff at all," he growled, "though the human is perfectly clear. I know it's there, but the mage appears completely alone. Do we go in?"

Sheylan only considered for a second before stashing her hails case behind a tumbled stack of crates. "Lead the way. If it's shielding itself, it may be past the larval stage, but I can't risk giving up if it's still immature. Let's just be careful, though; I don't feel up to a grand charge to the rescue today."

Now that was the question, she supposed. Was the idea now to effect a glorious rescue like some storybook heroine, or was she still just there to gorge herself silly on one of the most dangerous creatures known to man? She felt as torn as Ringraven itself. It looked like a whole army of beings, but was in fact only one, very big, and very spread out. Which meant that if one of the free-roaming shells saw her, they all would, no matter where in the city it

was.

Jax led her through the streets by the light of his heated crimson eyes and the echo-ghost of his inhuman mind. As silent as two shadows, they circled the building where the distress-call still howled, and Sheylan risked a quick flex of power to throw open the lock on the front door. Jax grinned with courser fearlessness and slid in first when Sheylan turned the knob.

In -

side, it



was all murky half-light from the draped windows, but Sheylan was used to staring into shadow. The parlor inside was a wreck, furniture, clothes, and miscellaneous ripped to shreds and tossed gleefully around the room and down the hall. Sheylan breathed a sigh of relief; this was exactly the type of damage larval Ringraven was purported to cause. Hopefully, this would be easier than she thought.

The door melted into the next world before she could lay a hand on it, and Sheylan suppressed a groan. So much for the surprise attack. Jarax growled

and crouched, ready to defend his debt-bonded to the death, all-too-possible with Ringraven a factor. She could see the thing now, a group of twenty shells, all tall and quaintly evil-looking, all less than human in appearance, black-skinned and with eyes like molten copper. They shouldn't be that big, she realized with a sinking feeling; it had to be damned near adult now, having cannibalized the weaker shells to boost the stronger ones' power. This was trouble, pure and simple.

The source of the call was, of course, not only Gifted but sacrificial, and a very handsome boy to boot. Resisting the urge to curse aloud, Sheylan decided she'd lay bets on him being a virgin, despite the evidence of her eyes. This thing was covering all its bases, and she doubted it'd fall for many of the tricks she'd hoped to pull in just such a confrontation. Not only that, if Jarax jumped in there now, she'd merely be out a courser and a damned good friend, and she sure as hell didn't want to pay the same price to find another.

"Hold on," she said quietly to Jax, putting out a steadying hand. The courser still growled, and his muscles were tensed to spring, but at least he stayed put. One of the shells clapped softly, as if in congratulation, and Sheylan frowned in distaste. Another gestured grandly, and a soft glow filled the room, just enough to bring the shadows into sharp contrast, but not enough to antagonize Jarax; the thing wasn't that stupid.

"Wise move," Ringraven said through the first shell, speaking in the exact accent of the people of Attantha. "You'd lose much and gain nothing. But if you feel capable of a deal, I'm sure we could work out something. I know what you want."

"That's not hard to do," Sheylan smiled humorlessly. "A mage with a courser shows up on your doorstep; I hardly think she'd be looking for daisies. And what on earth do you think you could have that I want *but* your life?"



The thing smiled, and all the shells mirrored it. "Your life. You're not traveling just by choice. Your Gifts took your home, your friends, changed your voice and your eyes so everyone who heard or saw you knew exactly what you were. Too many Gifts, too strong, never enough power, or so you think. And so you keep looking. We could supply it, for a price. A working relationship of sorts."

Sheylan frowned in disbelief. How could Ringraven know all that? It couldn't be reading her; coursers were notoriously jealous with their mages' minds. Unless it was so obvious even a monster could tell; it wasn't as if she was trying to hide her aberrations, after all ... "What do you mean?" she couldn't help asking, ignoring for the moment both the groaning young man on the altar and the constant vibration of Jarax's growl.

"My continued existence is more than worth a shell or two's destruction. With what you glean from that, you'd have more than enough excess to power the creation of more, so I could grow. I believe I could keep you powered enough to not only control the outward signs of your Gifts, but to help you accomplish whatever you wished. All I ask is that you not take so much that you destroy me, as the one who summoned me attempted to do — and that you allow me this one last feeding, so that I can survive your draining me. I swear not to attack you in the middle of it, mage — you could be far too valuable to me, and I to you."

"Thanks," Sheylan replied wryly, making a show of relaxing back on her heels. She was convinced it was serious; it wouldn't try to kill her until she'd refused its offer, but she couldn't reason why. Indeed, if she waited until it had slaughtered the young man, she knew she wouldn't refuse — but she had no intention of waiting. She couldn't tell what working it was trying to perform with it shielded from Sight, but it couldn't be good news. "Just don't try anything," she warned aloud, while reaching for Jax's thoughts.

"What's it up to?" she asked, focusing her mind into private mode. Jarax fixed angry carmine eyes on her and snarled silently.

It thinks it can use you as its focus — I got under its shields for a moment when we first interrupted it. It'll scrap the shells and inhabit you — your mind and Gifts are

what it especially wants. And you're not going to be the first. Why not a whole breed of Gifted hosts, now that it's got a matched pair?

Give me a three-count, then attack, she sighed. If we wait until it's started this ritual, the interruption's going to slash it to pieces. Ready?

Jarax nodded. One, and she poised everything inside her, alive to the gathering power in the room Ringraven couldn't disguise.

Two. The blond man was thrashing violently, as alert to magic as Sheylan was, feeling the seconds of his life ticking away. Sheylan had no time to spare for pity; she was drawing in energy from all directions, the ground, the air, forming a huge hammer, hanging by a thread. Ringraven noticed what she was doing then, but couldn't stop unless it wanted to tear itself apart badly enough that Sheylan's measures would be redundant.

"Three!" she yelled, and as Jax leaped for the spokesman's throat, she brought the hammer down on the shells, blanketing the altar simultaneously with her own shields. As the power spit down in a blaze of blue-white sparks, Ringraven shrieked in mortal agony, lashing out in death throes that rocked the ruined house. Every shell that threw itself at Sheylan was turned aside by Jarax, displaying the blood-maddened grace and speed that made coursers invaluable.

Then the shells began to disintegrate, melting under the force of Sheylan's sudden grab and tug, pulling its power into herself, reaching for more

This was easily the most potent energy she'd ever tasted in all her years, and it filled her to the brim in this world and the Unseen with heady power. Her senses swam as she reveled in the overflow, watching what remained of the shells crisping grey-black in the hot blue rush of its collapse. While Ringraven fought with ferocious strength, once Sheylan had gotten her grip, it became harder and harder for it to resist. Now she knew why some mages resorted to soul-eating; she'd have to keep a short rein on herself from now on. If Ringraven wasn't such a threat to the rest of the Gifted once it reached adulthood, she didn't know if she could justify the risk in the name of the thrill.

With a last sliding scream into oblivion, Ringraven was gone, and the power stopped flowing. It was almost

like being jolted from a dream back into reality, and Sheylan had to catch herself to keep from falling. The building's foundations were still trembling uncertainly, and Jarax was watching her with a kind of weary expectancy that made her rather uneasy. Just what did the courser know ...? And then the rush was gone. Agony took the place of ecstasy, and although the power was still there, the euphoria had crumbled as the walls were now threatening to do. So this was what Ringraven did to mages; it gave them indescribable power, but turned them inside-out over hot coals. Even so, she didn't think she'd trade that feeling for any amount of hangover afterwards.

"Gods," she croaked, resisting the urge to lie down and die. The other mage had rolled off the altar, and was making his unsteady way towards her. "We've got to get out of here." Sheylan shook her head despite the nausea; she hated sounding redundant. Well, it was her own fault, she guessed, but she couldn't help wondering why Jax hadn't warned her; he'd obviously known what to expect. He'd probably thought Sheylan would underestimate his words, or just ignore them altogether.

Jarax growled in warning as the mage reached them, his face a pale disk in the gloom Ringraven's departure had left behind. "Are you all right?" she forced herself to inquire, wondering the same about herself. How long was this going to last?

"Thank you," he nodded. "We need to go ..."

With one hand on Jarax's shoulder and the other around the neck of the near-sacrifice, Sheylan managed to hobble outside before the house crumbled behind them. "That wasn't yours, was it?" she groaned, her brain jarring within her skull with every step.

"No." The young man shook his head quietly, and helped steer her back for her hail, and to a convenient hole in the wall where she could sit down and rest.

Gods, her head was roaring. "What's your name?" she asked, looking for a distraction.

"Tovan," he answered, and turned grateful blue eyes on her, almost too large for his sharp-boned face. Despite the pain making her almost as giddy as the power-high had, Sheylan took a moment to appraise the — supposed — virgin she'd rescued from the lair of

the figurative dragon. Perhaps this hero stuff wasn't so bad after all.

Then again, Keyssler had said things were heating up out West as well. She doubted she'd find another nest of Ringraven out there, but who knew?

Jarax's disgusted growl snapped her out of her musings. You want to spend the rest of your life hosting Ringraven and a million snot-nosed brats?

Tovan was glancing back and forth, curiosity and puzzlement branded on his features. Maybe we can find one that likes coursers, too, she sent back privately, pretending to consider that seriously. Friends share, and all that.

Don't even think it, he huffed in distaste. How do you feel? the courser asked, partly in concern, partly to change the subject.

"Well, I just rescued a damsel in distress," she grinned aloud, her smile widening when Tovan had the grace to blush. "And if he'll help his knight in tarnished armor home, I believe tradition states I have a reward coming."

And besides, she added to Jarax alone. I hate kids.

She was quite unsurprised when a near-invisible paw swiped out and cuffed her in the gloom. Again assured of the courser's affection, Sheylan allowed herself to be helped to her feet and led home.

✱

LADONNA KING lives in Portland, Oregon, with a stray that answers to the name "Ratboy". Her first story was published in the 1997 Writers of the Future anthology; "Ravenous" is her second. She has also had one poem published in *Not One Of Us* #19. When she isn't chained to her desk, she enjoys photography, haunting libraries, and playing musical cities. Her most recent goal is to keep the same apartment for more than three months.

JULIA LACQUEMENT is a premiere watercolorist with a flair for color and design. She received her formal training in Canada before coming to the U. S. to pursue a career in comics, science fiction, and fantasy art. Tending toward fantasy themes, she has also painted botanicals, nudes, horror and Asian-influenced pieces. Exhibiting for more than a decade at sci conventions, she has won repeated awards for Best of Class, Show, Color & Humor. Her work may be found in numerous publications, CD-ROMs, and on T-shirts. She is now juggling more traditional gallery works into her schedule.

An Interview With Pamela Dean

by Lawrence Schimel

Pamela Dean is best known for her novel *TAM LIN*, a novel which manages to combine a sensitively-written story of a woman's coming of age during her years as a university student, and a retelling of the battle between a woman and the queen of fairy over the fate of the woman's lover. The ballad culminates in a dramatic battle where the woman must hold her lover while the fairy queen changes him into one frightening magical beast after another.

Ms. Dean, in her forties, lives in Minnesota, where she is one of the last remaining members of the famed "Scribbles" writers' group. She is married.

MZBFM: Your characters often love the pursuit of knowledge, a theme which is certainly prevalent in *JUNIPER*, and also in *TAM LIN* with its collegiate setting. To me they read as a sort of utopian novel for the deprived intellectual childhood, and I'm sure many of your readers also feel more than a twinge of jealousy of these idyllic educational environments.

PD: This actually used to worry me a lot, until a friend of mine finally told me in utter exasperation to "give up the survivor guilty and just show us the good stuff."

What is your own educational background?

Well, to start with, just the usual (for the time — 1958-1971) progression through elementary school and junior and senior high school. I passionately hated gym class and had intermittent trouble with math, and of course had some bad teachers. I went to Omaha Central High School at a time when it was very highly regarded and had some teachers as good as or better than the ones I later got in college.

I graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota (the model for Blackstock College in *TAM LIN*, of course), in 1975 with a B.A. in English. I didn't want to leave Carleton and fled in something of a panic to SUNY-Binghamton. I'd planned to get Ph.D. in English and to teach English at the college level until I could get established as a writer, but it became immediately apparent that I was a terrible teacher and that I hated teaching, so I bailed out with an M.A., went home to Omaha, and took a secretarial job because I had to pay off the loans I'd gotten through Carleton on.

And your feelings about the process of learning, both in and out of the classroom?

— are summed up very nicely in Merlyn's lines from T.H.



White's *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING*: "The best thing for being sad... is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewer of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never

fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Look at what a lot of things there are to learn — pure science, the only purity there is. You can learn astronomy in a lifetime, natural history in three, literature in six. And then, after you have exhausted a milliard lifetimes in biology and medicine and theocriticism and geography and history and economics — why, you can start to make a cartwheel out of the appropriate wood, or spend fifty years learning to begin to learn to beat your adversary at fencing. After that you can start again on mathematics, until it is time to learn to plough."

In *JUNIPER*, one of your characters mentions the young adult novel *OWL IN LOVE* by Patrice Kindl. I was struck by this, not simply because it is one of my own favorite books, but because of the way it uses the text to subtly champion this overlooked gem of a book.

This is a dangerous game, truly, but I did love the book and I thought it fit.

I think the voice of *OWL IN LOVE* hovers so delicately between this 14 year old girl who shapeshifts into an owl, and an owl who shapeshifts into a 14 year old girl; I was horribly jealous when I learned it was Kindl's first novel.

Yes, appalling, isn't it? The opening is marvellous in that way.

I believe the author lives in your general neck of the woods; do you know her personally, or are you a fan-from-afar, as I am, through the magic of her words on the page?

I didn't know she was a Minnesotan, if she is; I heard about the book from Hilary Hertzoff, a children's librarian who helped me with many lists of books the Giant Ants might be supposed to be reading.

More in general, do you read YA novels often?

I have some YA authors I follow, none of which I discovered as a child: Zilpha Keatley Snyder, E.L. Koenigsburg, Katherine Paterson, some others I can't call to mind at the moment.

Did you read any YA novels as a child, or did you jump immediately into more "adult" literature?

I read both pretty indiscriminately. At some point my parents got the library to give me a library card good through books considered appropriate for kids in the ninth grade, and that held me until I could have an adult card. I remember with particular fondness the Heinlein juveniles, Andre Norton's books, and Barbara Sleigh's Carbonel books, and **A WRINKLE IN TIME**; but I didn't really distinguish between YA and Other; I had other axes.

*Many of your novels feature young protagonists, but some — such as **THE DUBIOUS HILLS** — are most assuredly adult novels. What, if anything, do you see as the difference between YA and adult novels — in their scope, themes, whatever?*

It's been made very clear to me that whatever I may see of the difference has no reference to the facts. People are forever asking me why the Secret Country books were not published as YA. I tried twice to write YA books for Jane Yolen when she was editing her line for Harcourt Brace. She tried very hard to buy **THE DUBIOUS HILLS** — from a portion and outline; it wasn't written yet — but couldn't get any in-house support for it; everybody thought it was too complicated for kids. I also started **JUNIPER, GENTIAN, AND ROSEMARY** for her — she had bought the original short story — but that one was too complex too. I suppose YA authors are at least defter than I in packing their layers of meaning in so there's something simple on top to deceive the unwary. But I really don't know.

Your characters often recite poetry; I assume you are, yourself, an avid poetry reader? Of which poets?

Somewhat out of practice and very much out of date, but yes.

This list would be different, at least in its outliers, tomorrow, or even after lunch, but here's a snapshot, anyway:

William Shakespeare, John Keats, Tennyson, John Milton, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Walter de la Mare,

Amy Lowell, Elise Matthesen, John M. Ford, Jane Yolen, Terry Garey, T.S. Eliot, Pablo Neruda, Homer, Sappho, Jane Hirshfield, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Archibald MacLeish, W.H. Auden. Oh, and Anonymous, of course.

Do you also write verse/lyrics?

Not any more. I wrote quite good poetry for a fifteen-year-old, and when I was in my twenties it was still quite good for a fifteen-year-old. I prefer rhyme and meter and haven't the flexibility, the ear, whatever to do it well.

Two of your books are based on ballads; do you sing?

Not where anybody can hear me. I had read the ballads as poetry for years before I ever heard anybody sing any of them. (It was Steeleye Span, when I did hear — what a revelation.)

Can you give a brief explanation of the Pre-Joycean Fellowship, and why you choose to proclaim yourself a member of this group by citing "P.J.F." after your byline?

At this point I'm not at all sure a brief explanation is possible. It's a joke, of course, referring to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It seemed at the time it was coined — I think this was Will Shetterly's fault — to usefully encompass a particular set of artistic questions and problems that the Scribbles happened to be dealing with. Some people thought it should really be a secret society, that we should just smile mysteriously when asked about it, and see what readers deduced from what works and writers had the P.J.F. attached. I suppose if you put a bunch of initials after your name on the title page of a book it is bound to get some notice, but I didn't really expect the intensity of the reactions, and I think we got perhaps excessively intense for a while in response — if you look at the stuff in the rec.arts.sf.written FAQ about the P.J.F. you can see some earnest remarks from me and some countervailing ones from Will.

Trying once again to be brief, but only in the context of the above, we really did feel that an unhealthy separation had taken place between what might be called "popular" values and what might be called "literary" values. You can see this at work when people either embrace or decry the pulp origins of science fiction, when they either embrace or decry the recent — well, since the New Wave, I guess; one's definitions of "recent" do stretch as one ages — trend towards using rather well-worn mainstream literary techniques in science fiction and calling them experimental. We thought science fiction and fantasy should be able to have it all.

And frankly, it tickled us to see that a publisher, that enormous lowering presence with its hideous contractual language, its refusal to tell you what your reserve against returns was, its arcane rituals regarding cover art, its ponderous and historically particular (and now largely defunct) distribution system, this huge entity we entrusted our books to, would actually, graciously, humorously, let us put those

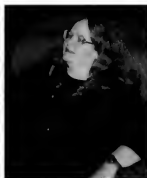


Photo by Rachel E. Holmen



initials on the title page. Why look — in however trivial a manner, they actually un-bent.

The Scribbles, that mythical writer's group that has been the envy of young fantasy writers around the country who love urban fantasy and fairy tale.

I feel I must puncture this balloon by remarking that Nate Bucklin and Patricia Wrede have long since dropped out; that the remain-

ing five of us went on for quite some time; that Kara Dalkey married John Barnes and moved out of Minneapolis; that the remaining four of us carried on for a longer time; and that Will Shetterly and Emma Bull moved to Los Angeles, leaving us with an email list and tiny local meetings between me and Steven Brust, who doesn't like doing written critique.

Can you talk about your involvement in the group and what it's meant to you, in terms of support or community, how it's influenced your writing, and so on?

I don't at all know that I would have finished my first three books without the group; I would have a different agent, if any; I would have started with a different editor and a different publisher. Finishing the first book and getting it published would have been incalculably harder. We nagged and cheered one another, we learned by doing, we made dopey mistakes. As for the influence, I think it came primarily in providing me the courage to try new things and not be discouraged, as I watched other members of the group re-write whole stories from the ground up and try the apparently impossible; and also, although most people's idea is that a writing group will produce a kind of artistic cloning effect, that I became a more individual writer by resisting the wrong kind of criticism, and by seeing how my strengths and weaknesses differed from everybody else's.

Do you read works of literature aloud—among friends, family—and was this a part of your childhood?

It was definitely a part of my childhood: every night each of the three of us, my brothers and I, would choose a book, and one parent or the other would read either the entire book if it was short or a chapter if it was longer. This went on at least until I was eight or nine; when I was ten my youngest brother was born and when he was old enough I read to him, as did everybody else.

For many years I was part of a play-reading group. It began with the intention of reading all of Shakespeare's plays aloud, which in fact we did; then, having learned so much, we did some of them again, and added other playwrights. Eventually people's schedules got so complex, and finding plays we liked that had the right number of people got so hard, that we stopped meeting.

Do you belong to a reading group? If so, do you read contemporary literature or "classics" or a mix of both?

No, I don't belong to a reading group, unless you count my household, all of whom read voraciously.

Do you belong to a writer's group?

The remnants of the Scribbles, largely in email, as mentioned above. I also have lunch every Wednesday with two other local writers, and we complain about our books and

our research and our characters and hand out very rough drafts of what we're working on; it's primarily a support group, but we also offer general criticism, and will read a bit of work with certain questions in mind if the author asks for that.

Do you read your own work aloud?

No, except for the occasional line of dialogue I'm dubious about. Well, I read it at conventions sometimes, but I don't think that's what you meant, is it?

I am concerned about how sentences sound, but I guess I must subvocalize.

What have you been working on recently?

Well, I've taken to calling it the Work Not in Progress, but I guess in some sense you could call it work. It won't let me work on anything else, which a stuck book has never done to me before. It's a Liavek novel (yes, I know, about five people in the world remember Liavek, but it stands alone, so those five people can entertain themselves with tracing out all the elaborations of the connections to the short stories I had in the five Liavek anthologies, while nobody else need feel bothered about it). It's about the Desert Mouse, a small theater, which has outgrown its present quarters and through some distant family connections of Thrae, the owner, fallen heir to a much larger building the original uses of which no one seems to recall, though it's served as a warehouse, a hospital, and a temple.

It turns out to be haunted. Finding out why and by whom seriously upsets the entire theater company and all its relationships.

While not writing the book, I've been reading up on the history and origins of the theater, western and desert gardening, the historical role of the theatrical manager in England, failed systems of botanical nomenclature, and interesting theatrical anecdotes.

Do you have any favorite advice for starting writers?

Oh, yes. Regard all advice to writers with extreme skepticism. The more specific and prescriptive or proscriptive it is, the greater your skepticism should be. Do not fall upon rules telling you should be doing everything differently; do not fall upon rules of this sort at all unless your purpose is to smash them flat. I could write six essays full of advice for beginning writers, any one of which would be right for some and dead wrong for others, and all of which would flatly contradict all the others.

Writing is an extremely individual process. You need to find out what yours is. This is a lifelong endeavor, so you might as well get it to.

How? Write.

This doesn't mean you can't ask writers for advice if they seem amenable, or that you shouldn't read how-to-write books. You just shouldn't approach either with any necessary reverence. Your very favorite writer may have a philosophy and a writing process that would be death to all your stories if you tried it under the assumption that it would work. If you try it very warily, it probably won't do much harm. There is no One True Way. Stop looking for it.

Want to mention any upcoming autograph sessions or convention attendance?

Well, not having written anything for too long, I haven't any autograph sessions, I'm afraid. I am sociable only in bursts, but I always attend Minicon and often attend Wiscon.

Thank you, Pamela Dean.

✱

Pamela Dean Bibliography

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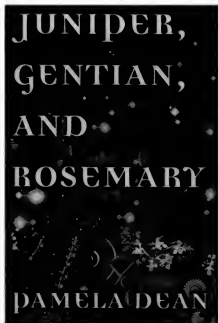
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NIGHTCHILD

by Marian Allen

The door of the roadside gift shop screeked open, and a woman stepped into the wind. She stopped. Her clear nearly-colorless eyes looked straight ahead at nothing in particular.

What she saw was at the corner of her vision. Something white against the blackness of the mountain shadow. Something vertical, not a splash of stray light. She heard something this time, like the wind, but of a deeper tone; more than a whisper, but not much more: Her name. *Doris*...

For a week past, the shadows had been haunted by that pale glow. At night it seemed closer, brighter.

She turned her head sharply, and the thing was gone. It always was, whenever she tried to look at it directly.

Surefooted on the treacherous gravel, she walked along the verge of the Interstate, a foot-long brown parcel tucked under her arm.

The wind seemed to follow her, snapping at the hem of her faded dress, coating her bare legs with the sticky gray powder of pulverized gravel. On the horizon, the red and orange flour-

ish of sunset was darkened by the thick, poisonous fog from the coal refinery in the valley.

The young woman, thin, tall, almost shimmeringly blonde in the gathering darkness, seemed not to notice the wind and its chill. A red dirt path snaked up the steep hillside. Doris climbed effortlessly.

She scanned the surrounding wild grass, the grass graduating to shallow, sterile topsoil, then to rubble and rock. The house wasn't yet in sight; it was over the crest of the knoll. A garish yellow light threw the crest's rubble into weirdly-shadowed relief.

"Doris?" Ma called, her voice sharp with its usual after-dark apprehension. "Doris! You there?"

"Yeah, Ma. Almost home."
She waited until she heard the screen door tap shut before she resumed her climb. The whiteness at the edge of her vision climbed with her.

As she rounded the top of the hill, the house — a two-room shack — came into view. Inside, with her mother, would be the boys: Rafe, just turned

seven, small and outspoken, like his mother in her youth; and Jason, twelve, hefty and smoldering, like his father in his lifetime.

Doris went up the cinder-block steps onto the porch. The screen door gave a soft, low moan as she entered the cabin. The door-spring was gone, dead of rust; the life in the wood, like that of the rest of the cabin, had long since been sucked out by dry rot.

Ma stood at the wood-burning stove, dishing up food.

"You bring me my candles?" she asked.

"Yes'm. I put them on the table. They sure are getting to cost these days."

"I know it, honey, and I hate to have you spend it, but I can't sleep without candles burning. Ever since that time your Pa and me was first married and he went off hunting and didn't come back for so long ..."

"I know, Ma. I don't mind the money, if the candles make you feel better."

Ma seemed to brighten, as she said, "We're all in, now." Then she said, "Friday night ... Thought you might

have a date on Friday night."

The boys came in from the cabin's other room. The small one giggled.

"She don't never go out," he said.

"You hush, Rafe," Ma scolded.

"Sister's just shy, is all."

"Sister's just ugly as a bullfrog," Rafe said. "Fishbelly white — looks like something that crawled out from under a rock —"

"Didn't she just tell you to hush?" the bigger boy said. "And close the door. It's getting cold."

"Doris left it open!"

"Close it, I say!"

"Do like Jason tells you," Doris said. "He's the man of the house, and you ought to have respect for him."

Rafe closed the door, and Jason scowled from under heavy black brows. "You oughtn't to have to have Doris tell you."

"Boys," said Ma, "quit fussing and come eat."

Jason rumbled a prayer, and dinner began.

"You know what?" Rafe asked suddenly, looking at his sister. "Claude Alderman says you give him the creeps."

"Rafe!" said Ma.

"Well, he does!" He turned back to Doris. "You give everybody I know the creeps. In fact —"

"Rafe," said Jason, "you shut up now. Doris works all day — she don't want to hear your foolishness when she comes home."

"Why ain't you working, you're so big?"

Jason hulked further over his plate. "I will be working, soon's I'm old enough. Soon's I'm sixteen, I'll quit school and go into the mines, same as Daddy. Then I'll be supporting you, too, and I won't be as good to you as Doris is. I won't give you no food or nothing," Jason warned to his subject. "And I won't let anybody else feed you, neither, and you'll get so scrawny you won't even make a shadow —"

"Stop it!" Ma's hands were shaking. "— and your bones'll poke out —"

"They will not! Doris'll feed me! My bones ain't gonna poke out — I hope you never see sixteen!"

Ma cried out as Jason swung a loose backhand at the smaller boy.

Doris half-raised from her seat. She reached out and stopped the hand before it connected.

"You was teasing him," she said. "That's why he said it. You shouldn't

tease him like that; you know how he hates it."

"What about him calling you creepy and everything?"

"I don't care about that silliness ..." She realized she was still gripping Jason's wrist. She released it and sat.

Everyone watched the blood rush pulsingly back into the deep white-yellow dents left by her hand. Then Doris went back to her supper, so as not to see the faces as they turned to look at her.

When the boys had gone to bed, Doris, in shirt and jeans, opened the door and stared calmly into the darkness.

"Going out, Ma," she said.

"It's cold out, Doris. You always was so frail ..."

"I never been sick a day, Ma. I'm just going out here onto the porch."

Doris sat on the edge of the porch, leaning against the house. The light from the window lapped around her feet and lower legs; the rest of her was in shadow.

"Pssst!"

Doris turned toward the sound.

A small figure moved forward, defined against the darkness by the unevenly-spaced white triangles which shifted around its body.

"Hi, Rafe," Doris said. "What're you doing out here? Where's Jason?"

Rafe pulled his patchwork quilt tighter around him and bellied up to the side of the porch, away from the black of the night.

"He went to sleep, so I snuck out the window. I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?" Doris smiled, and her teeth showed in the dark as a white patch in the white of her face.

"About ... Oh ... Thanks for not letting Jason belt me one."

"You're welcome, but that's not what you wanted to talk about."

"I thought you was gonna pop his hand off for a minute there, and ..." He hitched his blanket higher. "Lord, Doris, ain't you ever cold?"

She was silent for a moment. "No," she finally said. "I never am."

"Aw, it don't matter, Sister. Not to me, it don't. And I'm sorry I said you was creepy."

"That's all right, baby."

"Besides," he went on, "I just remembered something that's really creepy."

"What's that?"

"That ... that dream."

"What dream, baby?"

"I had this really creepy dream last night. I dreamed like I woke up and one of Ma's candles had went out. And there was this man back in the corner where it was all dark."

"If it was all dark, how could you see him?" Doris asked, thinking of the white thing in the shadows of her side-view.

"Same way I can see you in the dark, only clearer. Besides, I said it was a dream, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"Anyways, he just stood there, watching Ma, till the sun started to come up. Then he disappeared. The lighter it got, the less I could see him, and then the sun was up and I couldn't see him no more. And I got up and lit Ma's candle back so she wouldn't be all upset when she woke up. Then I went back to sleep — I mean, I dreamed I went back to sleep — and then I really did wake up. It don't sound too bad, telling it, but it was really awful. It made me feel kind of sick."

Doris reached out and stroked the boy's hair. "Don't let it bother you none. It wasn't nothing but a bad dream."

Rafe cuddled up under her arm.

"Doris, you ain't afraid of nothing, are you?"

"Nope."

"Don't it get kinda dull, sometimes?"

"Rafe ..." They heard a hoarse whisper from the back of the cabin. "Rafe, you better get back here!"

"Now, how'd he know this is where I was? I swear I believe that boy's got radar, no lie I do."

Rafe waved goodnight and ran back to bed.

"Doris!"

"Still here, Ma."

Ma sat by the window, where Doris could hear, and read the evening bible passages. She bowed her head and folded her hands, her fingers laced and flexing, as if they had to work even at rest. Then she looked up and said, defying the darkness, "I'm going to bed, now."

"Go on ahead. I'll put out the light when I come in."

Ma lit one of her candles and took it into the back room where her bed and two of the family's three ragged cots crowded together.

The third cot was stored in the back of the pantry, but long practice helped Doris remove it and set it up with barely

a sound. She went barefoot to the table, where she pulled down and blew out the kerosene lamp, and then to the box under the sink, where she kept her dress and her few other clothes. She pulled on her nightgown and saw the thing again.

Inside the cabin. Just inside the bolted door.

Doris, she heard, and knew the more-than-a-whisper came from the thing she saw.

She looked over her shoulder at it, turning her head slowly this time, her heart unerring in its beats. She knew, somehow, that it wouldn't melt away so quickly, this time.

It was tall and thin — very thin. Its sharp-boned face and deep-set eyes might have been her own. It smiled a greeting, and its teeth gleamed more brightly than the faint glow of its chalk-white skin. It wore clothes; Doris couldn't pin down their exact color, cut, or style, but they were clothes she would be familiar with if she woke to them in the night. It was male.

"Who are you?" she whispered, not wanting to wake the others.

It smiled again, more broadly, and motioned for her to come closer. She stayed where she was.

"I'm your father."

"... Daddy?" The mountain was thick with tales of spirits called by fear or need, and banished with courage or the touch of cold steel to spirit flesh. Doris knew some of the tales were lies, because she knew the folks who told them, but there were some she had never made up her mind about. And some of those were stories of spirits who came under false names to cause dark mischief. "You ain't my daddy," she said at last.

The door to the bedroom swung open, and Doris, her eyes still on the figure in the corner, heard Rafe whisper, "You out here talking to yourself?"

The figure was gone, as a shadow is gone when the light changes.

"Just thinking out loud," Doris said. "Go back to sleep."

"Mind if I leave the door open? I always feel better when I can't sleep if the door is open."

"Okay, baby."

Doris made up her cot and slept in the outwash of her mother's candles.

The next evening, as the two women sat together, one outside and one leaning through the window, Doris asked, "Tell me about my Daddy."

"What about him?"

"He was a good man, wasn't he? A nice man?"

"He was the best. And he loved you kids ... All of you. A lot of men don't take to girl children, but your daddy loved all of you. You remember."



"O' course I remember. He used to take me out hunting with him when I was little, before Jason got big enough to go. Then the other men made him leave me back. Made me mad, I remember, but ..." Doris shrugged.

"Made your Daddy mad, too, but that's the way things are."

"I didn't mind, once I got used to the idea. I liked having you all to myself, and then you and the baby, when Rafe came."

Ma smiled and put a hand on Doris's arm, a rare physical show of affection. "Don't know what I'd'a done without you, after your daddy passed."

Doris wanted to ask if her mother had seen the apparition, if that was what made night such a terror for her. She didn't see how she could, without

frightening Ma even more. Instead, she gave her mother's hand an awkward pat and returned to silence.

That night, it came again. It stepped out of the corner and approached her as she knelt by the sink, the shadows being deepest on her there.

"My father's dead," Doris stated coldly, before it had time to speak. "He died in the mine."

"The boys' father died in the mine," it said, and Doris knew that was true.

Though she felt no fear, anger was another matter. "My Ma was always true to my Daddy," she said, her voice low and threatening, like an explosion underground.

"Your mother was a beautiful woman when she was your age," the pale thing said. "All I had to do was wait for her man to go off hunting — they always do ..." It showed its teeth in a cruel grin. "These are good hunting grounds ..."

"I bet you took her asleep," said Doris. "You look like the kind that would."

It waved a hand, still grinning. Then it said, "Her man came back, all too soon for me, and your mother developed a sudden fear of the dark. Her man indulged her, unfortunately. But I didn't mind so very much when she locked me away from her with light and made herself forget that I'd ever been with her." It smiled a bleached-bone smile and nodded. "When I realized you were coming and

I knew you were mine, I knew you would be even more beautiful than she was. I didn't mind waiting for you to come, and grow ... You are more beautiful than she was. More beautiful than any of the others."

The man-like thing's look caressed the woman, still on her knees by the sink, and it licked its lips.

Doris's own lips curled back in an animal snarl of distaste. Alarms were clanging, whistling, within her; so loud that, if the mine had been working a night shift, she would have thought they came from outside. Still she felt no fear, only the presence of danger, of imminent and lingering danger.

"I've come to many women through the long years," said the thing. "Women alone, or lonely. 'Incubus,' I'm called.

Sometimes, after my first visit, they wait for me. Pray for me. Spend hours preparing for bed, drive their own men away, so they can be alone. Sometimes, like your mother, they fear me. Sometimes it's years before they relax, and I can come to them again. It's been nineteen years since I came to your mother. She's never relaxed. But now there's you."

"No, there ain't," said Doris. Her hand found another box beneath the sink and took a grip on a length of copper pipe.

"Who would know better than I how to please you?" said the incubus, stepping closer as it spoke. "Come with me, Doris. I can teach you how to rid yourself of your human trappings; they weigh you down, bind you to mortality. Your mother's clay — it shatters the light I gave you. Be free, Doris. We'll live forever. We'll roam the earth, incubus and succubus. You'll have your pick of the humans, as I have; male or female, as it pleases us. The two of us, Doris, my pet, my own."

Now it went to its knees beside the woman. As it leaned toward her, its lips parted and its luminous, colorless eyes closed.

Doris smashed the copper pipe into the forehead of the thing beside her. Its forehead dented, but didn't break, and the incubus laughed. It tilted off-balance from the force of the blow and Doris sprang away from it, toward the open pantry and the moonlit window.

It rose slowly.

From the other room, a woman's sleepy voice said, "Doris? What's all the noise?"

"Nothing, Ma," Doris called, her voice level and soothing. "Dropped something. Go back to sleep. G'night." "G'night ..."

The thing turned toward the closed door, then back to Doris. "Aren't those boys old enough for a hunting trip? Wait till she's asleep. Blow out the candles and leave her for me. Or stay, and join me ..."

Doris kept her voice soft, as she said, "You can go straight to hell."

"Come with me ..." the thing said, coming toward her. "There's nothing

to be afraid of."

Doris backed away from it. It followed, into the lighter shadow, into the moonlight. It grew transparent, but it didn't disappear. She could see the glint of its unblinking eyes fixed on her and it said, "Don't be afraid."

"I ain't afraid," Doris said. "I'm determined. You ain't having me, and you ain't having Ma no more."

Brave words, but how was she going to stop it? If braining it with a copper pipe hadn't fazed it, what would? Doris ransacked her memory for tales of spir-

"That's my girl," it said.

It stepped forward swiftly. Doris thrust out with the bread knife she held before her. The incubus arched backwards as the cold steel touched it, its face distorted in a soundless cry that ripped through Doris's mind. She stepped forward and slashed the steel down as if she were gutting a carcass. The pale body offered no resistance to the knife. The thing fell back, writhed, shriveled, and vanished, the echoes of its silent scream fading with it.

"Doris?" Ma called, her voice still heavy with sleep, but clearly alarmed. "Something ... something wrong? You all right?"

Doris breathed deeply and answered, "I'm fine, Ma. Nothing to worry about." She pushed back the curtain. She was alone in the pantry, alone in the kitchen, with no sign of her murdered father. Doris put the knife on the sink as she passed and opened the bedroom door, her eyes resting on her mother, rosy in the light of her guardian candles. "Just a nightmare. It's all over. Nothing to worry about."

Doris boiled some water and washed the knife and the copper pipe and put them away.

She shivered. Startled, she stood and let herself shiver again. Then, smiling, she put an extra quilt on the cot, and went to sleep.

✱

MARION ALLEN was born in Louisville, Kentucky and now lives in rural Indiana. For as long as she can remember, she

has loved telling and being told stories. When, at the age of about six, she was informed that somebody got paid for writing all those books and movies, she abandoned her previous ambition (beachcomber) and became a writer. She has worked as a high school teacher, an executive secretary, an accountant, and in Red Cross Youth Services. Allen has had three novels published on electronic disk and has had poetry and short stories published in small anthologies, in on-line magazines, and on electronic disk. Folklore, mythology, and archetypes are basic to her writing.

LORI DETTRICK lives in Knoxville, Tennessee with her artist husband David, and illustrates frequently for MZBFM and many other publications.



its and how they had been routed; but sunup and cock-crow, church bells and holy ground were all out of her control and reach.

She couldn't stand the thought of this thing's touching her but her best hope, the one thing she could think of that was available to her, would make that certain if it failed. Doris backed into the pantry, through the curtain that divided it from the kitchen, into the utter darkness.

The thing followed. Doris could see it glow, though it cast no light. She groped at the shelf beside her, then brought her hands together over her midriff, as if in prayerful prayer.

"Come ahead, then," she said.

The thing smiled and spread its arms.

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Princess Angelina and the Dragon

by Renee
Carter
Hall



"A sacrifice? To a dragon?"

"Now, sweetheart, I'm sorry, but —
"Isn't this a little extreme?"

"Well, the vizier says it's our best option — for the good of the kingdom, you know."

"Let me get this straight." Princess Angelina placed a slender hand to her temple as if to aid her thinking. It didn't need the help. "The royal vizier told you to sacrifice your only daughter to a dragon because she hasn't gotten married?"

"Ah. Well. When you put it *that way* ...
"When this aforementioned only daughter doesn't even want to get married — much less burnt to a crisp?"

"You have to understand, darling, we have the land's only vizier/soothsayer/short-order cook. He has powers we mortals can never even hope to understand."

Angelina understood well enough. Her father spent way too much time meeting with that fraud and calling soothsayer hotlines instead of paying attention to what was going on in his own kingdom. Few people knew that Angelina made most of the royal decisions behind the scenes.

But *this* ...! How was she supposed to choose between a forced marriage and a fiery death?

There was only one thing to do, of course: wait for her father to come to his senses ... and hope that it would happen *before* she reached well-done. She turned and headed back to her room.

"Where are you going?"

"To finish the treatise on the moat's water conservation," Angelina replied.

"If I'm going to die at the age of nineteen, I might as well leave something to the kingdom."

"Good news!"

Angelina looked up from her writing. "What?"

"I've found a prince to rescue you!" her father said happily.

The princess raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that kind of premature?"

"It's the way it's done these days. I sent word around, just to see who'd be interested."

This ought to be good. "Who's interested?"

The king unrolled a long scroll. "Prince Carad of Alandia. His resumé says he's quite handsome. Here, have a look."

Angelina scanned the resumé. Typical stuff: noble steeds, jeweled swords, the usual damsels in distress for references. Wonderful.

"I think he sounds just perfect," said the king.

"He's certainly very ... well documented," said Angelina dryly.

"He's also in the drawing-room. I thought you two might want to get to know each other."

"Um ... shouldn't it work like this: I get taken to dragon, prince shows up and rescues me, and then we get to know each other?"

"Not anymore, sweetheart. Now — let's go make introductions."

Halfway through her second cup of tea, Angelina was still making pointless small talk and trying to think of a way to get herself out of this crazy

situation.

"So, that was my third jousting tournament, where I won the silver ... um ... Princess?"

She snapped back to reality. "Huh? Oh ... that's ... very interesting."

"Princess, is something wrong?"
"Of course something's wrong!" she exclaimed, unable to stand it any longer. "This whole idea is wrong!"

"So you don't want to get married?"

"Well ... not yet, anyway. Or not to some empty-headed sword-flashing hero." She paused. "No offense."

"Who says I'm an empty-headed sword-flashing hero?"

"Your resumé."

"Oh, yeah. That. Well ... listen. I don't think you're going to get out of this dragon thing, no matter what. Your father's pretty serious about it, but I don't think he'd make you go through a whole marriage. Just go along with it. You don't have to marry me — just give me a chance, okay?"

At least someone was finally making sense. Besides, there was a hint of reality in this guy that wasn't half bad. "Okay."

The prince dug around in his pockets and pulled out a monogrammed handkerchief. "Here. You're supposed to take this as a token of my affection."

"How about I'll just take it as a guarantee that you'll show up?"

Prince Carad smiled. "Fair enough."

Ceremonies began the next morning at sunrise. Angelina was dressed in a white robe, and Carad suited up in polished armor. In the last ceremony, the vizier blessed a specially-forged



golden sword, protecting it against breaking in battle and guaranteeing a clean, swift kill, for three hundred miles or three hundred slayings (whichever came first).

After the formalities were done, Angelina was taken to the cave of Brimfire, the Dragon of the East. Many tales had been told and stories sung of Brimfire's fierce temper, cruel fire, and massive form. All of these stories and songs ran through Angelina's mind over and over as she stood nervously in the cave, palms sweating, mouth dry. It had been far too long. Carad should have shown up by now

A dry rustling sound and a trem-

bling shower of rock heralded Brimfire's arrival. Angelina swallowed and steeled herself. She wasn't going to cower or scream. Whatever it took, she was determined to be strong, and she stood bravely as Brimfire stepped into the cave.

He was just about as tall as she, and he walked birdlike on his hind legs. His snout was short, and his body was covered with small, glossy, lime-green scales. He lashed a long tail back and forth with each bobbing step he took.

Fear dissolved into skepticism. "You're Brimfire?"

He affected a very slight bow. "None other. So ... shall we get this over with?"

Angelina scanned the caverns. There was no sign of the prince.

"Say," the dragon asked, "are you a virgin?"

"That's a personal question," the princess shot back. "What do you care?"

He shrugged. "I've heard they taste good. I was just wondering." He cleared his throat, sending a shower of sparks across the cave. Both of them stood in uncomfortable silence for several moments. Finally the dragon spoke up.

"He's a little late, isn't he?"

"Hm?" Angelina had been scanning the caves absently.

"Your prince. He's supposed to be here. Look, we both know I can't really

eat you. Your father's paying me good to put on this show."

The princess blinked. "My father's paying you?"

Brimfire picked up a flat stone and sharpened his claws nonchalantly. "Sure, didn't you know? That's how it's done these days. The whole thing's a setup. Remember that blessed sword?" She nodded. "Fake. Blade's duller than the vizier's speeches. But your dad really went all out. I'm the best dragon in town. He wanted someone with a reputation, so only the princes who really wanted you would apply."

Angelina shook her head. "This is insane."

The dragon shrugged. "Hey, it beats blind dates." He paused. "Do you want anything while we're waiting?"

"Well ... I guess I am thirsty."

"No problem. Follow me."

"I still don't believe this is happening," said Angelina as Brimfire led her through a warren of tunnels. "My father knows I don't want to get married."

"What's wrong with marriage? Watch your head."

"Nothing, with the right person."

"So this prince isn't the right person?"

"I don't know. I've never bothered to think about looking for the right person."

Brimfire shook his head. "I don't know ... there's something strange here. This is a ritual, not a way to force love. Your father should know that."

"This'll be the first ritual I'll do away with, then," Angelina vowed.

"Here we are." Brimfire blew lightly onto the stone walls around them, lighting several torches set into the rock. A clear spring bubbled in the center of the cavern floor.

Angelina cupped her hands and drank. "Thanks. I didn't know dragons could be so hospitable."

"There's a lot most people don't know about dragons," sighed Brimfire.

"There's a lot people don't know about princesses, either," said Angelina.

"We don't all go around burning villages."

"We don't all worry about what dress we're going to wear to the royal ball."

"We don't steal gold or eat damsels."

"We don't pine away all day for our true love."

"You know, I like a fresh salad, myself," said Brimfire. "Cools the pal-

ate."

Brimfire with a wry smile. "Equal rights for dragons."

"It could, if a dragon chose to speak for it and get rid of some of these stereotypes."

"I'd rather just find one person who does understand," said Brimfire. "I mean, it wouldn't change the world or anything, but it'd be enough for me."

"You have found someone who understands," said Angelina. And then, strangely, she did something that she never would have dreamt: she placed her hand over his.

She expected his skin to be cold and slimy, but instead his scales were warm and dry — even smooth. After a moment, she glanced up and saw his face quite differently than she had before. Those yellow eyes were really closer to gold, and they could capture such knowing expressions ... rather like the one he was wearing at that very moment.

In a rather serpentine way, she realized, he was almost beautiful.

Then, not even half aware of what she was doing (much less why she was doing it), she raised her face to his and kissed him. It wasn't quite like a human-to-human kiss — the fit just wasn't right — but after a moment, a strange, delightful feeling coursed all the way down to her toes.

She pulled away and slapped him smartly across the snout.

Thanks to his thick scales, Brimfire barely felt it, but he was completely confused.

"I'll thank you to keep your forked tongue out of my mouth," she said.

He blinked. "I'm sorry — I didn't —"

"I don't even know what's going on" Reeling in a mixture of confusion and shock, she found a spot as far away from Brimfire as possible and sat down, hugging her knees to her chest and staring straight ahead.

Slowly, hesitantly, Brimfire approached her, crouching in the most submissive posture he could assume without falling over. "Angelina ...? I'm



"And I'd like to compete in a tournament of skills, instead of just watching the knights all the time."

Brimfire shook his head. "People just don't understand."

"So why do you keep up this act?" asked the princess. "Why make everyone think you're so terrible?"

"I don't have a choice. I've got to eat, and there's really nothing else a dragon can do for a living."

"That settles it," said Angelina. "First I'm going to stop this fraud, and then I'm going to see that there are better opportunities for dragons."

"Oh, that'll go over really well," said

sorry ... I went too fast. I haven't had that much experience with humans." He paused. "Actually ... I haven't had any experience with humans."

No reaction.

"Actually ..." He sighed. "Actually, I haven't had any experience with anyone. But listen ... I shouldn't have brought you here for water. I'm kind of immune to it, but I forgot you wouldn't be."

She turned to look at him. "Immune to what?"

"The water brings out true feelings — it's for cases of doubt. I forgot how fast it works ... and how deeply." He sighed again. "You don't know how hard a job this is."

"What do you mean?"

"I see them come and go ... princesses, ladies, all breeds of them ... princes, lords, knights, noblemen They've all got each other, and I'm happy to help, but ..."

"But what?" Angelina ventured softly.

"But sometimes I can't help wondering if it'll ever be my turn."

He fell silent, hanging his head in sorrow and shame, and Angelina thought she could see tears brimming in his glowing eyes. She took his hand in hers again.

A single tear wound through the scales of his face and fell upon the hem of her dress. "I don't want to lose this chance," he said quietly.

Angelina took out the monogrammed handkerchief and gently dried the dragon's eyes. Moments passed, and finally she placed a hand under his chin and raised his head, looking into his eyes with a sincere expression Brimfire never forgot.

"You haven't."

She put her arms around him; he returned the embrace. As they sat nestled together, her forehead pressed against his cheek, Angelina wondered what she was ever going to tell her father.

Two days later, Prince Carad finally showed up. Angelina met him at the

mouth of the caverns, blinking a bit in the bright sunlight.

"What took you so long?"

"Sorry," said the prince. "I took a few wrong turns in the enchanted forest, and ... well, you know."

Brimfire came outside and stood behind Angelina.

"Ah," Carad drew his sword rather absently, as if he had just remembered it was there. "Looks like I got here just in time."

all!" Then, to himself, "And now I owe him twenty silver pieces"

"Wait a minute," Angelina protested. "You mean this was *planned*?" She looked at Brimfire, who wore the same stunned expression. "Did you know about this?" He shook his head.

Angelina turned back to the prince. "What are you talking about?"

"It's how it's done these days — didn't you know?"

As Angelina learned, her father had known Brimfire ever since the fearsome dragon was just a hatchling, and when he decided that his daughter was a perfect match for the dragon (this knowledge courtesy of the vizier), he contrived an elaborate plot to bring the two together.

All of this was a great relief to Angelina, as she hadn't any idea how her father was going to accept a dragon as a son-in-law. But there was no protest, only celebration, and after a suitable engagement, wedding plans began. Surprisingly enough, the blessed sword (when melted down) yielded not only two gorgeous wedding rings, but an impressive set of flatware as well.

And after the kiss that sealed their marriage, Angelina's new husband said softly, "It's true, then."

"What?" she asked.

Brimfire smiled. "They do taste good."

Angelina returned his smile and took his hand, and they went out to greet

their kingdom.

✦

RENEE CARTER HALL has been writing ever since she could form letters. Although this was her first fiction sale, her short stories have since appeared in *The Threshold* and been accepted to *Matriarch's Way*, and she is seeking a publisher for her first novel, a work of fantasy for children. She lives in Virginia with her husband, who provides proofreading, constructive criticism, and moral support. She may be contacted via e-mail at renjef@earthlink.net.

GEORGE BARR has been a professional artist since 1960. He has received a Hugo as Best Fan Artist.



"Actually ..." Angelina glanced at Brimfire; he put his arm around her shoulders.

"Actually," the dragon finished, "you're a little too late."

A rather uncomfortable pause followed. No one knew what to say, but neither the princess nor the dragon needed to say anything. It was plainly written in their eyes, on their faces, and in the comfortably intimate way his arm encircled her. For his part, Carad's expression was curiously blank.

And then he broke into a wide grin.

"Your father's going to be thrilled! I said it'd never work, but he kept saying it would — and here he's right after

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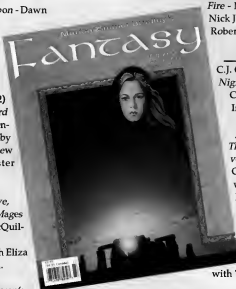
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THE LAST WORD

We're going to have a terrific "art gallery" feature in issue fifty. I've contacted many of the illustrators who have graced our pages and asked them to submit one piece of artwork each (which is part of the reason this "Last Word" is so full of news about the artists). This is in addition to a cover by Vincent Di Fate, a story illustrated by Alicia Austin, and more. So there's a lot to look forward to.

Paper Tiger Press has published entire books of artwork by two of our cover artists: one is **GREETINGS FROM EARTH: THE ART OF BOB EGGLETON**, and the other is **INNER VISIONS: THE ART OF RON WALOTSKY**.

Darrell Schweitzer's collection **NIGHTSCAPES: TALES OF THE OMINOUS AND MAGICAL** is dedicated "to the memory of Marion Zimmer Bradley, author, patroness of the arts". Three of the stories in the collection were originally published in this magazine.

Nick Jainschigg's cover for "Wild Swan" in issue 44 has been accepted to **SPECTRUM**, the prestigious annual compilation of fantasy artwork. Nick also reports that he may now be addressed as "Professor Jainschigg", since he's been hired by the Rhode Island School of Design.

Margaret Organ-Kean has quit her day job as a computer tech to pursue a fulltime career as an illustrator. A children's book she illustrated, **PETRONELLA**, has just been published by Moon Mountain Publishing. The website is www.moonmountainpub.com.

Rob Alexander and his wife, Susan Stejskal, have acquired a puppy, a tiny 40-pound black Newfoundland called Simon. (Simon is doing well at dog training school, which is a Good Thing since he will probably weigh 110 pounds when he's full-grown.)

Susan has registered a website, www.stejskal_studios.com. Her husband's website is www.robalexander.com.

Artist Alan Giana (pronounced Jee-AH-nuh) describes his work as "tradigital" — traditional styles created using digital media. He has a series of licensed puzzles coming out soon; check www.gianagraphx.com for details.

Artist Mark Ferrari was injured in late May when his bicycle collided with a van; he broke four ribs and one knee, but luckily his bike helmet saved his life, and his hands weren't injured. It will be several months before he'll know if the knee will recover fully. The accident did not prevent him from turning in the cover and three interior illustrations for "Rowan, Oak, and Iron", the title story by Susan Dexter for issue 49, though he did perform more of the work on the computer than usual since his hand hurt when he tried to draw.

Foolscape in Seattle was a small, fun convention; the guests of honor were Fred Pohl and Ginjer Buchanan and their respective spouses. When Fred had to leave the banquet brunch early to catch his plane home, Ginjer impulsively grabbed him and the two waltzed, to wild applause and clicking flashbulbs, for a few measures. Next year's convention will be held in the fall; banquet tickets (and memberships) are already selling fast.

WisCon, held in Madison, Wisconsin, over Memorial Day, was as usual a feast for mind and body (Madison has an eclectic range of restaurants near the hotel, thanks to its college student population). At a panel called "World Domi-

nation 101" with Pat Murphy, Kathleen Massie-Ferch, and Amy Hanson, I scribbled notes furiously. Expanding on the ideas put forth in a pamphlet on the freebie table about "how to promote a book you like", the panel and audience exchanged ideas about improving the visibility of feminist science fiction and fantasy literature. Amy Axt Hanson of Seattle is coordinating efforts to collect information and ideas, and has polled writers' groups in other genres (Sisters in Crime, Romance Writers of America, and Women Writing in the West). Amy's email is selenite@cs.com.

Speaking of feminist books, this year's Tiptree Award winner is Suzy McKee Charnas, for her novel **THE CONQUEROR'S CHILD**. (I was amused to see that the hardcover edition features a woman and child wearing leather bikinis — perhaps the Tor art director feels that anyone who would buy a Charnas book for that cover really should read what she has to say.) The award will be presented formally at Diversion in Minneapolis in late July.

THE SPARROW by Mary Doria Russell was a previous Tiptree Award winner, and I was fascinated by its story of a Jesuit priest, a WASP married couple, and a Jewish woman sent to scope out another, inhabited planet.

Two other highlights of WisCon were the Tiptree Auction, ably and entertainingly run by Ellen Klages — one could bid on serious items like a book signed by Tiptree's mother, or silly items like a chance to run the remote controls for the "Brazen Hussies" helium blimp for five minutes — and a wonderful concert by GoH Charles de Lint and his wife Mary Ann Harris. And by the end of the convention, I had arranged for a new email account: rachel@feministcaba.org.

I very much appreciate all the kind letters that people have sent, lamenting the demise of the magazine and inquiring about my future plans. Email me at reh@well.com and I'll let you know as soon as I figure out anything.

Meisha Merlin Press has issued an anthology, **SUCH A PRETTY FACE**, described as "stories of abundance" and edited by Lee Martindale, an author who has contributed to both the magazine and the *Sword & Sorceress* anthologies. Preorders are being taken for both the trade paperback and the hardcover edition. Hugo voters alert! Alexandria Digital Literature has nearly all the Hugo nominees available for download (and the authors will get royalties!) during the voting period. Check out www.alexlit.com.

I don't have a membership yet for ChiCon (anybody have one I can take over?), but I'll buy one at the door if I must; I have already arranged a room at the Swissotel and committed myself to critiquing manuscripts at the writers' workshop. I'll have to miss the Marin Quilt Show, where I'll have items on exhibit — don't ask me which quilts; I have to decide this week which ones I can have finished by late August — over Labor Day Weekend. But it will also keep me away from the quilt show's vendors (while putting me at the mercy of the convention art show and dealer's room), so my bank account may still come out ahead even after I pay air fare and hotel costs for the WorldCon. Quilt fabric. Conventions. Convention art shows. Quilt fabric. Books.

And I used to avoid skiing because I felt I couldn't afford an expensive hobby!

Have a good summer, and be sure to buy issues 49 and 50! You won't want to miss the Kwakiutl vampire story, or the tale of the undine forced to provide a dowry for the storyteller's beautiful sister, or any of the other great stories we have picked out.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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THE CAULDRON — ISSUE #48

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- ☐ **The Selkie's Tale** by Laura J. Underwood
- ☐ **The Secret** by Stacie Kirk
- ☐ **The Fey** by Renee Bennett
- ☐ **Mistaken Identity** by Charles Richard Laing
- ☐ **Ravenous** by Ladonna King
- ☐ **Nightchild** by Marian Allen
- ☐ **Princess Angelina and the Dragon**
by Renee Carter Hall

ARTIST

- ☐ Michael Kucharski
- ☐ Margaret Organ-Kean
- ☐ Allison Fiona Hershey
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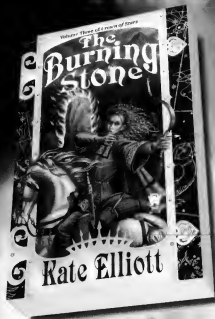
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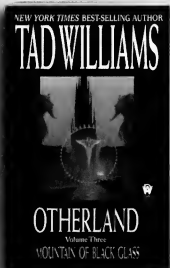
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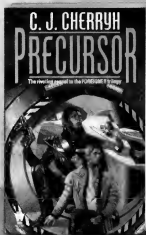
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